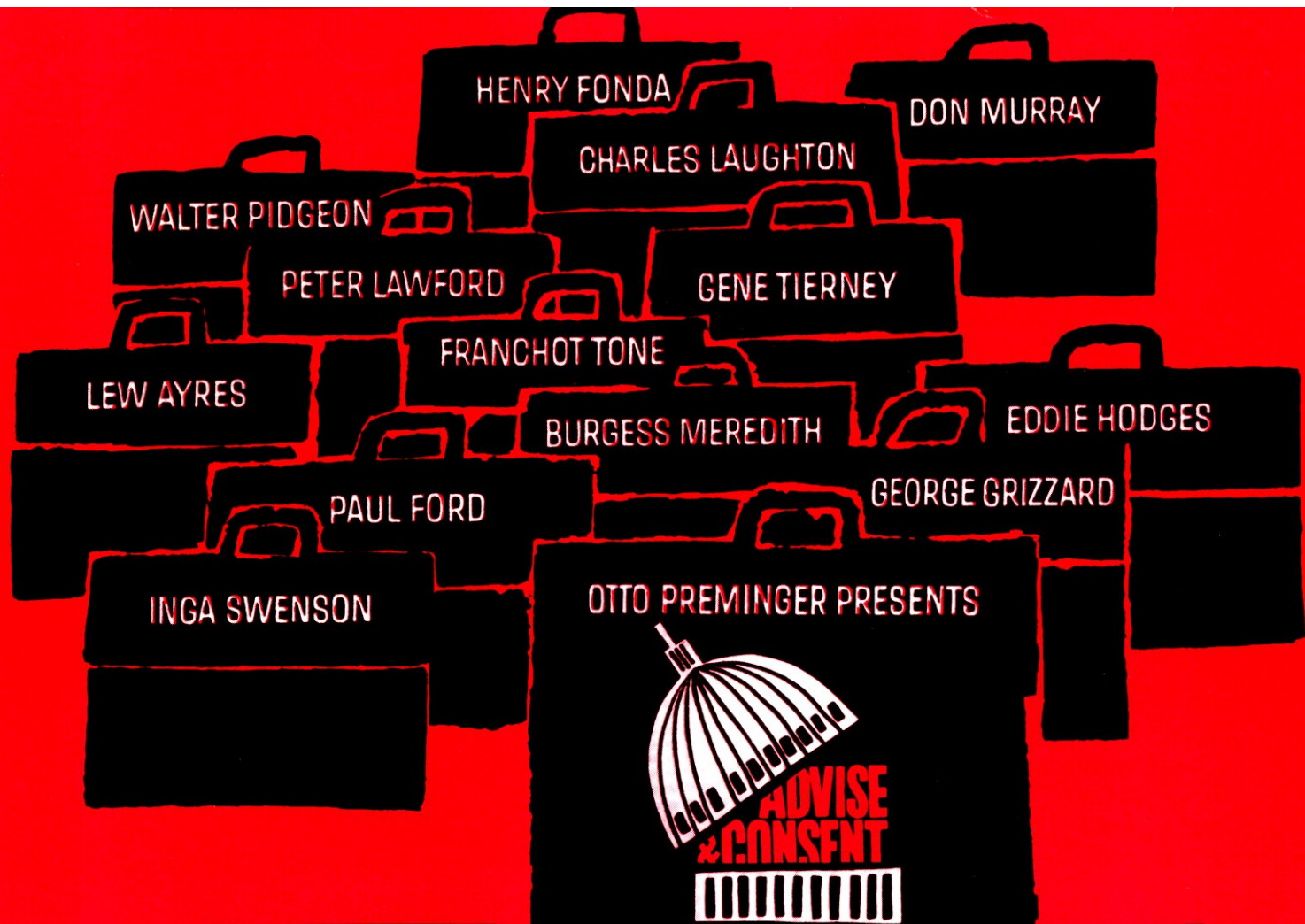


cine ACTION

Radical Film Criticism and Theory
NO. 41 \$7 CDN \$6 US

Style





WITH PAUL McGRATH, EDWARD ANDREWS, WILL GEER, BETTY WHITE, TOM HELMORE, HILLARY EAVES, RENE PAUL, MICHELE MONTAU, PAUL STEVENS, RUSS BROWN, MALCOLM ATTERBURY, SCREENPLAY BY WENDELL MAYES, BASED ON THE NOVEL BY ALLEN DRURY, MUSIC BY JERRY FIELDING, PHOTOGRAPHED IN PANAVISION® BY SAM LEAVITT, PRODUCTION DESIGNED BY LYLE WHEELER, A COLUMBIA PICTURES RELEASE, PRODUCED & DIRECTED BY OTTO PREMINGER

cineACTION

THE COLLECTIVE

Scott Forsyth
Florence Jacobowitz
Richard Lippe
Susan Morrison
Robin Wood

DESIGN

Julie Jenkinson
with assistance from Ida Fong

CineAction is published three times a year
by the *CineAction* collective.

Single copy: \$7 Cdn. \$6. US
Subscriptions: Canada and US:
(individual) 3 issues/\$18.
(institutions) 3 issues/\$35
Overseas add \$15.

Mailing Address:
40 Alexander Street,
Suite 705 Toronto,
Ontario, Canada
M4Y 1B5
416-964-3534

Manuscripts (typed, double-spaced) are welcomed. They should be accompanied by a stamped, self-addressed return envelope. The editors do not accept responsibility for their loss.

The opinions expressed in individual articles are not necessarily endorsed by the editorial collective.

All articles herein are copyright October 1996 by *CineAction* and may not be reproduced without permission.

We would like to thank the Ontario Arts Council, the Ontario Publishing Centre and The Canada Council for their generous support.

CineAction is owned and operated by *CineAction*, a collective for the advancement of film studies. *CineAction* is a non-profit organization.

ISSN 0826-9866
Printed and bound in Canada

STILLS:

Special thanks to Cinematheque Ontario for their generosity.
Above image: Lobby card *Advise & Consent* (1962)
Otto Preminger/Saul Bass
Front cover: Dominique Sanda and Stefania Sandrelli in
The Conformist

contents no. 41

editorial

- | | | |
|----|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------|
| 2 | Florence Jacobowitz and Richard Lippe | |
| 4 | The Little Space in Between:
Preliminary Notes on <i>Before Sunrise</i> | Robin Wood |
| 14 | Style As Attitude: Two Films by Martin Scorsese | Richard Lippe |
| 22 | Rewriting Realism:
Bergman and Rossellini in Europe 1949-1955 | Florence Jacobowitz |
| 33 | Style and Narrative in Bertolucci's <i>The Conformist</i> | Michael Walker |
| 43 | Maintaining the Dual Perspective:
Orson Welles and <i>Chimes at Midnight</i> | Peter E.S. Babiak |
| 50 | New Parents and Old:
The Horrifying Lyricism of Dancing on Graves | Diane Sippl |
| 60 | Larry Cohen's <i>Bone</i> : Comic Strip as Radical Style | Tony Williams |
| 68 | Book Review: Cinema and Painting:
How Art is Used in Film | Susan Morrison |



Editorial

This issue of *Style* is devoted to the concept of visual expression. The range of articles offered illustrates the diversity inherent in the idea of style: it is meaning embodied in form, the evidence of a personal aesthetic statement, the very essence of filmic representation.

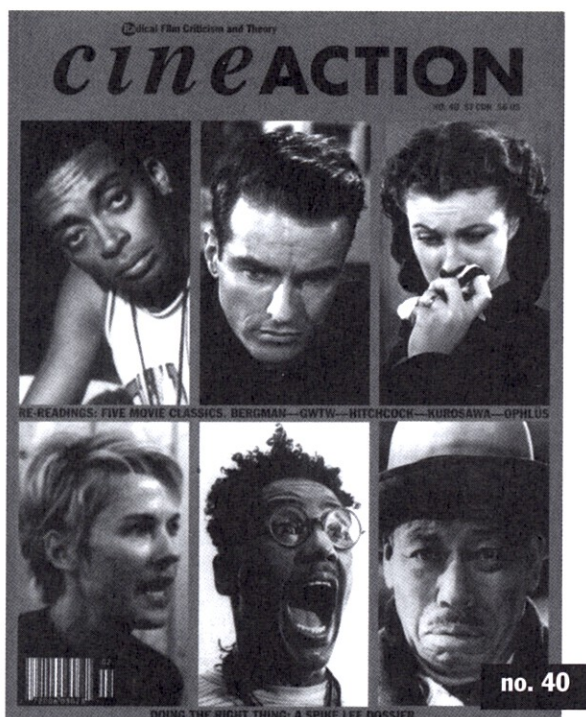
We distinguish our interpretation of style from a formalist position which tends to isolate style from the creative process which produces it. Most of the articles in this issue contextualize the films discussed, acknowledging the range of creative presences, whether it is the director, cinematographer, costume or production designer, who have contributed to the films' identity. Although style is often difficult to define, it is what distinguishes a work that is vital from one that isn't.

We dedicate this issue, in memoriam, to two great stylists, John Alton (1901-July 30, 1996) and Saul Bass (1920-April 25, 1996). The stills presented here of Saul Bass's graphic designs for Preminger's *Advise and Consent* and John Alton's cinematography for Alan Dwan's *Slightly Scarlet* illustrate the value of human achievement over computer-generated imaging.

Style, in more recent years, has been used as a signpost of self-reflexivity, the end being a cynical awareness of the fictional nature of representation. While this has been a useful challenge to the monopoly of narrative illusionism, it's time to rethink the concept of style in more inventive terms.

Florence Jacobowitz
Richard Lippe

*cine***ACTION**



**TO
ORDER
BACK
ISSUES**
use the insert card

- 1** Neglected Films of the 80's
- 2** Women in contemporary Hollywood
- 3/4** Reading the text (double issue)
- 5** Alternative Cinema
- 6** Scorsese (sold out)
- 7** Stars (sold out)
- 8** Revaluation
- 9** Comedy
- 10** Sex (sold out)

- 11** Godard (sold out)
- 12** Teen Films
- 13/14** Film Noir (double issue)
- 15** Interpretation
- 16** Canadian Cinema
- 17** Re:Positioning
- 18** Imperialism and Film
- 19/20** Critical Issues (double issue)
- 21/22** Rethinking Authorship (double issue)
- 23** Documentary: theory and politics
- 24/25** Feminist Film Theory/Criticism (double issue)
- 26/27** Melodrama and the Female Star (double issue)
- 28** Canadas: cinema and criticism
- 29** Revaluation: Hollywood
- 30** Framing the Family
- 31** Narrative and Film
- 32** Race-ing Home: Race and Cultural Identities (sold out)
- 33** Screening the New World Order

- 34** Modernism
- 35** Gays and Hollywood, Queer Cinema
- 36** Toronto International Film Festival: Black Audio; John Woo
- 37** Movements, History and Filmmaking
- 38** Murder in America
- 39** Contemporary World Cinema
- 40** Re-Readings: Bergman, GWTW, Hitchcock, Kurosawa, Ophüls; A Spike Lee Dossier

FUTURE ISSUES

- 42** Cuban and Chinese Cinemas
- 43** 90s Cinema

Ethan Hawke

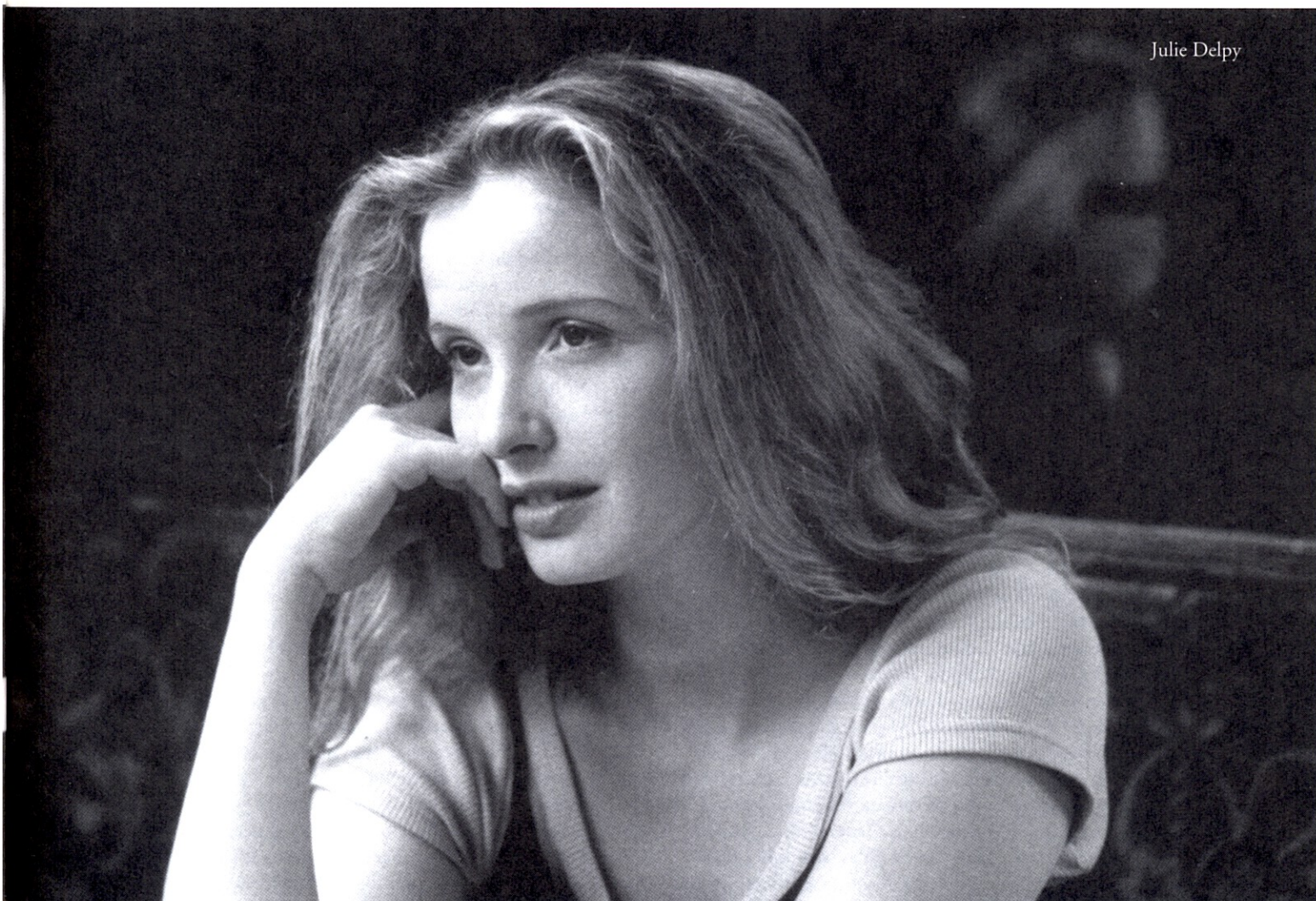


The Little Space in Between:

PRELIMINARY NOTES ON *BEFORE SUNRISE*

“...You know, if there’s any kind of god, it wouldn’t be in any of us, not you, or me, but just...this little space in between. If there’s any kind of magic in this world, it must be in the attempt of understanding someone, sharing something. I know, it’s almost impossible to succeed, but who cares really?
The answer must be in the attempt...”

— Julie Delpy in *Before Sunrise*



by Robin Wood

I knew, the first time I saw *Before Sunrise*, that here was a film for which I felt not only interest or admiration but love; a film I would want to revisit repeatedly over the years; one that would join the short list of films that remain constant favourites; and one that I would ultimately want to write about, as a means at once of exploring it more systematically and of sharing my delight in it with others—of finding that “magic” in the “attempt”. I believe in the possibility of a ‘definitive’ reading of a work only in the sense that it is definitive for myself at a certain stage of my evolution, that it ‘defines’ not the work but my own temporary sense of it, the degree of contact I have been able to achieve, as clearly and completely as I can; but I do not feel ready, with *Before Sunrise*, for even that limited and provisional undertaking. What follows, then, should be read as a series of loosely interconnected and

often tentative probes, the beginning of a ‘work in progress’: a preliminary attempt to define why, for me personally, this film belongs among the dozen or so that exemplify ‘cinema’ at its finest.

STYLE

‘Style’ is a necessary word whose meaning we all think we understand until we try to give it a precise definition; indeed, like many necessary words, it may be useful only so long as its meaning remains somewhat vague. If we restrict it to camera-style we can handle it fairly confidently, talking about long-shots or close-ups, static or moving camera, high angle or low angle, long takes or rapid editing. Yet this is never sufficient, and such an analysis, however meticulous, may become actually misleading, as well as a way of privileging some styles of filmmaking over others. It might, for example,

lead one to the conclusion that the films of Leo McCarey had no style at all, or at best a style lacking all distinctiveness and distinction, whereas its great distinctiveness (McCarey at his best is always instantly recognizable) arises not from the use of the camera but from the relationship between the director and his actors. With Linklater one can indicate certain specific stylistic preferences—the fondness, for example, for long takes, both with and without camera-movement—but this will not take one very far in defining the *feel* of the films, one's experience in watching them, to which 'style' is obviously crucial. In this wider sense (ultimately the only valid one), style will always elude precise definition. Nor is the old style/content dichotomy very helpful. It works only if one reduces 'content' to something like a plot synopsis or the 'action' as one might narrate it to a friend: the 'content' of a film is images and sounds, and the specific nature of those images and sounds is 'style'. To talk of the two as somehow distinct and separable is impossible, and the moment one begins to talk about 'style' as something with an autonomous existence one also begins to misrepresent the film. This is true even of the work of directors who developed an instantly recognizable visual style, who are commonly seen as 'great stylists'. To take two obvious extremes (both of whom might, I think, have had an indirect influence on *Before Sunrise*), the visual styles of Ozu and Ophüls are inextricably a part of the meaning of their films; and—unless, again, we define 'content' as plot synopsis—the content of a film is its total meaning, which can never be finally fixed (it will change subtly for each generation, as cultural change brings new perceptions). This is not to assert that style must 'express' content in the sense familiar from traditional aesthetics. It would be more accurate to say that style is the artist's means of defining the relationship of the spectator to the film. Aside from the 'realist' (i.e. illusionist) styles of most mainstream cinema (and those already embrace a very wide range of possibilities), there are the 'Brechtian' styles (another wide range, as the term has been applied to everything from Sirk to Godard) and the various styles of melodrama. But they too are inextricable components of a film's meaning, its content in the wider sense.

LEVELS OF MEANING

A. The cover of the laserdisc of *Before Sunrise* gives (somewhat unusually) fascinating and useful information about the film's conception and creation. One can distinguish various stages in its progress from idea to realization:

i. Richard Linklater, in New York for a work-in-progress screening of *Slacker*, decides to visit

relatives in Philadelphia; he meets a woman in a toy store, and they spend the night wandering the streets, talking.

ii. Some years later (after completing *Slacker* and shooting *Dazed and Confused*) he sees this experience as the possible basis for a film.

iii. Feeling the need of a woman's input ("I didn't want the woman in the film to be a projection of myself"), he enlists Kim Krizan (whom he had met when she auditioned for *Slacker*) as fellow screenwriter; together they compose scenes in which he provides the man's dialogue, she the woman's, but with some interchange (he wrote some of 'her' dialogue, she some of 'his').

iv. Ethan Hawke and Julie Delpy are cast as the two leads, and there follows a series of consultations in which they also contribute ideas, often drawing on personal experience (Hawke: "It was like mutual group therapy, a great way to begin"; and Linklater: "The fake phone call scene came from something Julie did with her girlfriends as a teenager...I thought it was brilliant, so we just worked out the scene from there...")

v. Filming begins, but the screenplay still leaves space for interpretation, improvisation, accident (e.g., the two actors in the 'play about a cow' really *were* two actors in a play about a cow... Hawke: "There were a lot of scenes like that.")

The laserdisc cover fails to maintain this level of interest and intelligence to the end (quoting *Glamour Magazine*, informing us that *Before Sunrise* is "The most winning romance since *Four Weddings and a Funeral*," and apparently not grasping that this is an insult). But such first-hand documentation of a film's creation is all too rare; so often, we critics have to rely on interviews with directors discussing films they made ten or twenty years earlier, memories of which are inevitably partial, and coloured by distance, bias and exaggeration. Just one crucial step is missing: Why Ethan Hawke and Julie Delpy? How were they cast? Were other actors considered, approached, rejected? I ask because, given the result, it is absolutely impossible to imagine the film without Hawke and Delpy (Tom Cruise and Nicole Kidman? Or, really to scrape the bottom of the barrel, Rob Lowe and Demi Moore?). It is clear, not merely from the account of its making but from the result, that Hawke and Delpy made themselves integral to the collaborative creative act: Have any two actors ever given themselves more completely, more generously, more *nakedly*, to a film? The usual distinction between 'being' and 'acting' is totally collapsed. *Before Sunrise* is both, and indissolubly, 'a Richard Linklater Film' (no one else could have made it) and a densely collaborative one. It

would be an ideal subject for one of those 'Special Edition' laserdiscs where, on an alternative audio track, the filmmakers and actors give a running commentary on the film as we watch; one hopes that some enterprising executive will organize this before the film recedes too far into the past.

This gives us three levels of reading: Is this a film about Jesse and Céline (characters), Hawke and Delpy (actors) or Linklater and Krizan (filmmakers)? The levels are there, but they merge into each other to the extent of being ultimately undistinguishable from one another. The 'style' (and also the meaning) of the film is not merely Linklater's decisions as to where to place and when to move the camera; it is also Hawke's precise gestures, Delpy's precise expressions, their intimate interaction: hence ultimately unanalysable on paper.

B. Although it is not very useful, it seems necessary to say that the 'meaning' of a great film is ultimately itself: the movement from shot to shot, the precise sequence of sounds and images. Victor Perkins has demonstrated that the 'meaning' of *The Wizard of Oz* is *not* reducible to "There is no place like home"; on a higher level of achievement, one must not reduce *Tokyo Story* to "Life is disappointing, isn't it?", or that favourite refuge of western critics *mono no aware*; and "For me, life is movement" does not sum up *Lola Montes*, let alone *Ophüls in toto*. Such explicit statements have their place in the fabric of a film's total meaning, but only as a contributing factor within a context that may qualify or even contradict them. I shall not, therefore, attempt to find a phrase to sum up the meaning of *Before Sunrise*, but I shall venture to suggest that its meaning develops simultaneously on three continuously interactive levels:

- i. Personal: the detailed description of a highly specific relationship between two complexly characterized individuals.
- ii. Social: the exploration of contemporary (post-60s/70s feminism) attitudes to love, relationships and romanticism.
- iii. Metaphysical: the pervasive preoccupation with death, time and transience, chance and arbitrariness, a world without any sense of certitude or confidence in the future.

AFTER THE END

We know of course (having been told so many times) that characters in a fiction have no existence beyond it, and it is therefore improper to speculate about their lives outside it. But *Before Sunrise* seems to defy such a prohibition: everyone with whom I have watched it immediately raises the question of whether or not Jesse and Céline will keep their six-months-

ahead date. The general consensus is that they probably won't, a conclusion one might find supported by both the melancholy *andante* of Bach's first viola da gamba sonata that accompanies the penultimate sequence, and the song that accompanies the end credits, with its refrain "Hold me like a lover should/Although tomorrow don't look so good", and its celebration of "living light": there are simply too many of those mundane obstacles, too many highly unromantic practical questions (about money, work, travel, distance, where to live...) that seem trivial 'before sunrise' but will begin to loom very large after it, as time passes. (So far I have found only one dissenter, but a very intelligent one: Lori Spring, filmmaker, teacher of screenwriting and member of the original *CineAction* collective, who told me that she never had the least doubt that the date would be kept). That the six-months date inevitably evokes *An Affair to Remember* doesn't really help, beyond reminding us that 'happy endings' are no longer as generically guaranteed as they used to be. But the verdict is always reached with great reluctance, testifying to the continuing pull, despite all the battering it has received, of the romantic ideal as a powerful and seductive component of our ideology of love and sexuality. I think this response—the 'realistic' acknowledgement of uncertainty, precariousness, the transience of feelings, the recognition that *amor* doesn't always *vincit omnia*, qualified by a 'romantic' yearning for commitment, stability, permanence—corresponds very closely to the film's overall tone or 'feel', accounting for the resonance it has for contemporary audiences (with more confident marketing, it could have been a runaway 'hit').

There is a third alternative: that one will and the other won't. My initial reaction was that, if that were the case, the one who did would be Jesse. I thought this might be the product of some lingering trace of sexist prejudice—the 'fickleness' of women and all that—but its tenability was subsequently confirmed by one of my female students, who came up, quite unprompted, with the same conclusion and offered the same justification: that he is the more 'romantic', she the more 'realistic'. And indeed, if such idle speculation has any interest, it resides in the possibility that it throws some light on the film's 'personal' level, the level of individual character. I found myself commenting earlier on Ethan Hawke's *gestures* and Julie Delpy's *expressions*. Obviously, the distinction isn't absolute; but Jesse habitually acts things out, as if constantly anxious to convey what he means—or thinks he means, or wants to mean—he can't simply 'be' sincere but must continually demonstrate his sincerity. Of the two characters he seems the more insecure, the more vulnerable, the less mature. Céline—more educated, more aware, more

intellectual, though not necessarily more intelligent—is far more at ease with herself, more stable, hence less demonstrative. There is no absolute opposition: the more times one sees the film the more complex the characters appear, both revealing certain basic uncertainties, anxieties about life and death, and by the end of the film she has shown a vulnerability that corresponds to his. But the initial impression, though much less confident, lingers. The intensity with which she clings to him in their final embrace before she boards her train, the expression of near-desperation on her face which he can't see but we can, suggest both that initially she will be the one who suffers the more and that she already has no real hope of a future with him; her intellectual awareness will help her to cope. One imagines him, back in America, obsessively developing (and insulating himself within) a romantic fantasy which he half knows to be unrealistic, while she continues to meet people, look outside herself, form other relations. (On the other hand he has his buddies, not to mention his dog!). And if he is at the station on the appointed date, a part of him will even take a certain masochistic satisfaction in his disappointment; she, meanwhile, will be smiling quietly to herself at the memory of a magical night, with pleasure, tenderness and a passing regret, and will wonder where he is and what has happened to him before going on with her own life.

I have changed my mind many times as to whether to include the above conjectures or cut them, partly because I am uncertain as to whether they have any critical validity, partly because every time I see the film I become less confident of their validity even as interpretation. If I finally decide to leave them, it will be because the very fact that I surrender to such temptations indicates something very specific and very important about the way the film works. It is characterized by a complete openness within a closed and perfect classical form (an unquestioned diegetic world, the unities preserved, the end symmetrically answering the beginning). The relationship shifts and fluctuates, every viewing revealing new aspects, further nuances, like turning a kaleidoscope, so the meaning shifts and fluctuates also. No two individuals will respond in quite the same way, or in the same different ways on a second, third or fourth viewing. Ethan Hawke's reference to 'group therapy' has implications far beyond the first stages of discussion among filmmakers and actors, it extends to the audience, involves each individual spectator in a complex dialogue: Do you feel this, do you agree with that, how exactly does this affect you, your attitude to life, your ideas about relationships, the relationship you are in, the relationship you want; or do you really want a relationship at all? The questions the film raises are

never answered, the uncertainties it expresses are never closed off. But in any case, the tug of the longing for permanence is so powerful that one would love to see a sequel (*Céline and Jesse Go Boating* perhaps) in which they did keep the appointment, returned together to...France? America?... and tried to work out ways in which 'commitment' is still feasible.

However, the question of Will they or won't they? may be a simple (and sentimental) evasion of the real question posed by the film's ending, which is far more radical and disturbing: Would it be better if they did or if they didn't?

POINTS OF REFERENCE

Through its intimate and detailed treatment of its central couple, the film explores the possibility of 'meaningful' or 'successful' relationships today (in the aftermath of 60s/70s feminism, with its profound effect on male/female relations which the 80s/90s backlash has been unable to eradicate): a possibility at once longed for and called into question. The film provides three reference points or touchstones, constructing a backdrop against which the problematic of contemporary relating can stand illuminated. One is dramatized within the fiction, the other two are extra-diegetic.

THE QUARRELING GERMAN COUPLE ON THE TRAIN

I take it that, like Céline and Jesse, we are not expected to understand what the argument is about (money is mentioned), but we get the impression that the mutual and bitter animosity is habitual, perhaps that it is one of those petty squabbles that often substitute for discussions of the *real* marital tensions that cannot be spoken. The couple are directly linked to Céline and Jesse, as the fight is inadvertently responsible for their first meeting: Céline changes her seat to get further away from their noise (she is trying to read), taking a seat across the aisle from Jesse; she and Jesse first make eye contact as the couple stride angrily past them down the aisle, and exchange deprecating smiles to acknowledge their shared awareness; they first make verbal contact when he asks her if she "has any idea what they were arguing about"; and their relationship may be said properly to begin with Céline's "Have you heard that as couples get older, they lose their ability to hear each other?". We are also shown, in a brief single shot, an elderly couple, silent, who perhaps have reached a stage of resignation and stagnation beyond bitchy arguments and who might be taken as representing what the fighting couple will become if they remain together. This is the immediate context within which the beginning of a new attempt at relating is placed; a marvellously succinct and unobtrusive statement of the film's thematic starting-point.

Letter from an Unknown Woman: Joan Fontaine and Louis Jourdan in the Prater



Before Sunrise. Uncertainties of a relationship.



DIDO AND AENEAS, LISA AND STEFAN

The overture to Purcell's mini-opera accompanies the opening credits, the tragedy-laden introduction over the white-on-black main titles, the *allegro* neatly synchronized with the first images, shot from the rapidly moving train, its final chord coinciding with the appearance of the director's credit. And, for any film-lover in the audience, the Viennese setting, the visit to the Prater, the complex examination (however different in spirit and conclusion) of romantic love, cannot fail to evoke *Letter from an Unknown Woman*. Both these reference points view romantic love as variously doomed and tragic, and in both the woman is at once the emotional centre/identification-figure and the

prime sufferer, but there the parallel ends: the Queen of Carthage, abandoned by Aeneas, dying apparently of a broken heart (though possibly, following tradition and anticipating Berlioz, she commits suicide, the stage direction offering only the sparse and enigmatic "Dies"); the woman who has grown up, starved of power and the experience of beauty, in a *petit bourgeois* milieu in late nineteenth century Vienna, and wastes her life in selfless (or selfish?) commitment to the potentially great concert pianist whose life is wasted already, in the impossible quest for vicarious fulfilment. These were surely intended (and if they weren't they should have been) as indicators of past attitudes to romantic love, and as such they cover, altogether, a

remarkable time-span: Virgil, Troy, Carthage and 'Italy' (to found which is Aeneas' divinely ordained destiny and his reason or pretext for abandoning Dido); Purcell's late seventeenth century England; 'Vienna, about 1900'; Hollywood, about 1947; and Vienna, 1995. [This is the first time a Linklater movie has evoked a past more distant than that of his 'horror' film *Dazed and Confused*, and these are not the only references to it. There is the pervasive presence of Vienna, its architecture, its history; Céline's mini-lecture on Seurat ("I love the way the people seem to be dissolving into the background", a description that might apply, less literally, to *Before Sunrise*, with its consistent concern with time and place and its repeated reminders of other human lives being lived—the actors, the fortune-teller, the poet, the people in the restaurant), and the film's most purely magical moment where the couple, at dawn, on their way for Céline to catch her train and, they believe, about to say their last farewell, become suddenly aware of the sound of a harpsichord emerging from a basement apartment, where a very early riser is playing Bach's 'Goldberg' variations].

It is these reference points that imply the question I raised, implying (one might say) a signpost to an unknown destination. If a relationship must lead either to the tragic waste and desolation offered by past concepts of romantic love or to the stagnation and bitterness into which so many contemporary marriages seem to degenerate, would it not be better if Jesse and Céline were left at least with indelible memories of one magical night? The film's challenge is to define the unknown destination: if we *want* them to form a relationship (as surely we do), then it must be of a quite different order from anything offered by the familiar models. This is surely why the outcome becomes so important to us: not although but *because* it is so concretely realized and particularized—and certainly because the film convinces us so thoroughly of its potential value—it raises very acutely and precisely the fundamental questions for every spectator today: how do we relate?—how *should* we relate?—how might we relate?

In this context, comparison with *Letter from an Unknown Woman* seems especially suggestive, the films' extreme stylistic differences corresponding to an equally extreme difference in the depiction of romantic love. Both directors are obviously fond of long takes, but of a diametrically opposed nature: Ophuls' long-takes-with-camera-movement are meticulously choreographed trajectories guiding the characters from *here* to *here*, suggesting some form of predestination or entrapment (whether we interpret it in metaphysical or social terms seems a matter of personal bias, as both can find support within the film). Linklater's—typically with a static camera, or with movement that is clearly determined by

the movement of the actors rather than *vice versa*—leave the actors free, permitting spontaneity. That romantic love in Ophuls is viewed as inevitably tragic is always traceable to the subordinate position of women (with whom he plainly identifies) in patriarchal culture: in *Letter*, romantic fantasy is Lisa's only escape-route from the ignominy and constriction of her social position. The lovers of *Before Sunrise*, on the contrary, meet and negotiate on a level of equality: it is difficult to see that Jesse enjoys privileges that are closed to Céline.

That the film, however one reads the ending, always seems so inspirational and life-giving is surely because, within a cultural situation that often seems incorrigibly and fathomlessly discouraging, it reminds us that there *have* been advances, and important ones, however minor they may appear amid the current right-wing devastation.

A NOTE ON THE METAPHYSICAL LEVEL

It may at first seem paradoxical (but is in fact absolutely logical) that a film so committed to life should be so pervaded by references to death. Death is, after all, the supreme test of one's sense of meaning. The couple's intimacy begins to blossom under death's shadow, when (in the lounge car of the train) Jesse describes his childhood experience of seeing his great-grandmother, just deceased, in the rainbow formed in the spray of a garden sprinkler, concludes by deciding that "death is just as ambiguous as everything else", and Céline confides that she is afraid of death twenty-four hours in every day. Throughout the film, references to death counterpoint the continuous awareness of the passing of time (the few hours before they have to separate, the past centuries the film evokes). Jesse's sudden recognition, at dawn, that they are "back in real time" is immediately juxtaposed with their awareness of the sound of the harpsichord, and shortly followed by his imitation of Dylan Thomas's recording of an Auden poem about the impossibility of evading the passing of time, which leads in turn to their abrupt and frantic decision to meet again, just as Céline's train is about to leave. These intimations of mortality confer upon the relationship—however it is resolved—its beauty and importance.

IDENTIFICATION

Like 'style', identification is a necessary word whose usefulness diminishes in direct ratio to the rigidity of its definition; when it is reduced to counting POV shots (or simply to 'the male gaze') the usefulness is somewhere around point zero. I have tried to address at some length the complex possibilities of identification (degrees of sympathy, 'split' identification, conflicts of identification at different levels simultaneously,

etc.) in the Ingrid Bergman chapter of *Hitchcock's Films Revisited*, and shall not repeat the full argument here (it has not, so far as I know, been refuted, just ignored, as is usually the case with arguments the current critical hegemony finds inconvenient). It will suffice to say that I use the term to cover the entire spectrum, from our sharing the experience of the entire action with a single character (who would have to be the audience's magnet of sympathy and present in every scene, a possibility that remains in the realm of the hypothetical), to the flickering and fleeting play of sympathetic attraction shifting from character to character. With the former extreme one thinks of Hitchcock, but in his films such 'total' identification is invariably either brutally shattered or subtly undermined: by the abrupt demise of our identification-figure (*Psycho*), by his sudden withdrawal from a crucial scene that reveals what he doesn't yet know (*Vertigo*), or by the systematic erosion of confidence in the acceptability of his behaviour (*Rear Window*). The latter extreme is also uncommon, but Renoir is its most obvious practitioner in, for example, *La Grande Illusion* and *La Règle du Jeu*.¹

From first scene to last, *Before Sunrise* systematically and rigorously resists encouraging identification with one character above or against the other (and it's difficult to think of any other film that achieves quite this feat). Do men automatically identify with the male, women with the female? I doubt it, although our gender may of course entail a certain bias which the film goes out of its way to undermine: *some* men, *some* women, perhaps, but only those so fanatically devoted to the rights of their own sex that they are insensitive to the film's 'style', the structure of its shots and its scenario, the marvellously achieved equality of its two central performances.

WATCHING AND LISTENING

When we talk casually of 'reading' a film, most of us usually mean reading between the lines or below the surface, in order to extricate and explicate its 'meaning', or at least its thematic complex. One does this, of course, with *Before Sunrise*, but the film demands more, a 'reading' in a more literal sense: we must *watch* and *listen* simultaneously, with the most careful attention to every gesture, expression and word, because 'meaning', here, refuses reduction to 'theme'.

I have to confess, at this point, to a failure: even on first viewing I told myself that I would 'one day' analyze in detail the scene in the listening booth of the record store, in which nothing happens except that Ethan Hawke and Julie Delpy either do or don't look at each other, their eyes never quite meeting. After a dozen viewings I abandoned the project. I suppose one might try an elaborate system of charts and timings, annotat-

ing 'direction of the gaze', when and how long each looks (or doesn't)...which would demonstrate nothing of the least importance. With no camera-movement, no editing, no movement within the frame except for the slight movements of the actors' heads, nothing on the soundtrack but a not-very-distinguished song that may vaguely suggest what is going on in the characters' minds and seems sometimes to motivate their 'looks' ("Though I'm not impossible to touch/I have never wanted you so much/Come here"), the shot seems to me a model of 'pure cinema' in ways Hitchcock never dreamed of (not merely 'photographs of people talking', but photographs of them *not* talking), precisely because it completely resists analysis, defies verbal description. All one can say is that it is the cinema's most perfect depiction, in just over one minute of 'real' time, at once concrete and intangible, of two people beginning to realize that they are falling in love.

I shall content myself, then, with two scenes that, without at all lacking the essentials of 'pure cinema', the obligation of the spectator to watch and listen, offer themselves for some kind of clumsy verbalizing: the 'Question and Answer' game on the streetcar, the imaginary telephone conversations in the restaurant. The scenes 'answer' each other (within this meticulously structured film which manages to look as if it was 'made up as they went along') in a complex pattern of similarity and difference: both are games, played by the two characters as a means toward mutual understanding through play, occurring at different stages in the relationship's development, the first essentially a mapping-out of differences, the second a means of discovering each other's feelings and confessing their own, implicitly with a view to a possible future ("Are you going to see him again?"/"I don't know. We haven't talked about that yet"—followed by a silence); Jesse initiates, and partly controls, the first game, Céline the second. And the scenes are paired formally by a strict stylistic opposition: the film's longest single take (just over five minutes) answered by its most heavily edited sequence (forty-three shots in just over five minutes).

Q & A

The interplay of gesture and expression throughout the long uninterrupted two-shot is so dense and intricate that one really needs to watch it three times (as one can do without difficulty on the laserdisc as it is contained within a single 'chapter'): once watching Hawke, a second time watching Delpy, a third time trying to 'see' them both together. Otherwise, one's eyes dart constantly from one side of the frame to the other and one misses many of the nuances.

Gesture and expression are of course meaningless unless one is listening simultaneously and with equal

attention to the dialogue, which defines certain important differences that in turn contribute to defining 'this little space in between'. Céline describes her 'first sexual feelings' in terms of a romantic crush on a famous swimmer she actually met, Jesse his (after evading her real question, "Have you ever been in love?"—we learn later that he came to Europe to meet a woman and they have just broken up) in relation to 'Miss July, 1978', in *Playboy*. The answers to, respectively, Jesse's "What pisses you off?" and Céline's "What's *your* problem?" are even more revealing. Her answers show a wide-ranging and enquiring (if embryonic) awareness of practical realities: social ("I hate being told by strange men in the street to smile, to make them feel better about their boring lives"); political (a war going on "300 kilometres from here" and "nobody knows what to do or gives a shit"); socio-political (the media are "trying to control minds" and "...it's very subtle but it's a new form of fascism really"); sexual-political ("I hate being told, especially in America, 'Oh, you're so French, you're so cute', each time I wear black, or lose my temper, or say anything about anything"). His answer, on the other hand, while it also reveals an enquiring, thinking mind, is more abstract, philosophical-metaphysical: he speaks of reincarnation and eternal souls, and the ensuing conundrum of the increase in world population: "50,000 years ago not even one million, 10,000 years ago two million. Now five to six billion. Where do the souls all come from—a 5,000-to-one split. So is this why we're so scattered, so specialized?" (While marginally more rational—if one accepts its premise—this recalls Linklater's own hilarious monologue in the taxi at the beginning of *Slacker*).

THE IMAGINARY PHONE CALLS

The forty-three shot sequence perfectly exemplifies that fundamental principle of western (and other?) art, almost (but not quite) perfect symmetry. It is introduced, punctuated around the midpoint, and closed, by three identical two-shots of the couple opposite each other at the restaurant table; Céline's imaginary call has twenty-eight shots, filmed in strict shot/reverse-shot form; Jesse's has twenty-two, filmed similarly. To clarify:

- Shot 1: Two-shot: the couple
- Shots 2-29: Shot/reverse-shot (Céline's call)
- Shot 30: Two-shot: the couple
- Shots 31-42: Shot/reverse-shot (Jesse's call)
- Shot 43: Two-shot: the couple

The restaurant scene follows the scene in the street at night that concludes with Céline's speech quoted at the head of this article, the last words provoking a lengthy silence and a cut to long-shot as they continue sitting on the bench; it is introduced (before the imagi-

nary phone calls) by a series of shots of other customers: a mixed group at one table, two men playing cards, two bearded men conversing, a woman alone reading a book, an American couple (the man grumbling about the service), two men and one woman, laughing at a joke...other lives, other relationships, other problems. Céline's speech, and the other customers, create a context (both of lives and of ideas) for the couple's exploration (through the game) of each other's feelings and expectations, testing the possibility of a continuing relationship. I feel disinclined to dissect this wonderful sequence in detail. I would describe it as one of the film's high points, were it not for the fact that it doesn't have any low ones. The use of play as a medium for revealing truths and emotions that one can't quite dare speak 'seriously' is touching in itself, in its implications of vulnerability, the desire to speak out inhibited by the fear of being hurt, the suspension at the end—Jesse's question (in the role of Céline's confidante) "Are you going to see him again?" remains unanswered—anticipating the similar suspension in which the spectator is left at the end of the film.

FINAL

Perhaps the film's moment of greatest tenderness occurs *after* the lovers have separated: the sequence of shots (accompanied on the soundtrack by Yo-Yo Ma playing Bach) re-viewing the places they visited as the new day begins, some with the first stirrings of activity, some still deserted, an old woman glancing disapprovingly at the empty wine bottle they discarded in the park where they made love. The sequence evokes the ending of Antonioni's *L'Eclisse*, but without its sense of desolation and finality: rather, the feeling is of sadness and happiness inextricably intermingled, regret for the separation and the uncertainty but a deep satisfaction in the degree of mutual understanding and intimacy two human beings have achieved in a few hours, how nearly successful the attempt to bridge "this little space in between". And, as Céline says, the "answer", the "magic", must be in the attempt. The same might be said of the critic's relationship to the films s/he loves.

¹ There may be a direct connection between Renoir and Linklater—there is certainly common ground, in the emotional generosity, the range of sympathy, the attitude that manages the difficult feat of being critical without being judgemental. I think particularly of *Slacker*: Renoir once said that the film he's always wanted to make but could never set up was one in which we would follow one set of characters for a little while, then others would walk by or appear in the background and we would leave the first set and follow the newcomers, who would shortly give way to yet others, and so on throughout the film. *Slacker* may be Linklater's realization (though very much on his own terms) of the film Renoir never made.



GoodFellas: Henry (Ray Liotta) bonds with Jimmy (Robert De Niro) and Pauly (Paul Sorvino).

STYLE AS ATTITUDE: Two Films by Martin Scorsese

by Richard Lippe

It is inconceivable that any critic who has seen a number of Martin Scorsese's films would reject the claim that the director is a stylist and that his work displays thematic consistency. But the claim, the basis of auteurist criticism, can have its drawbacks and particularly so when it leads to the kind of critical thinking that has greeted his two most recent films, *The Age of Innocence* (1993) and *Casino* (1995). The former was given a predominantly polite but cool reception because it wasn't the kind of project, a period piece and a melodrama, associated with Scorsese the director of *Mean Streets*, *Taxi Driver*, *Raging Bull* and *GoodFellas*; with the last, Scorsese was taken to task for supposedly retooling one of his former successes.¹ On the one hand, *GoodFellas* and *Casino* do have a lot in common: a) in addition to dealing with organized crime and having narratives which span decades, both films were adapted from fact-based books by Nicholas Pileggi, who, with Scorsese, co-authored the screenplays; b) the

stylistic devices found in the two films include voiceover narration, freeze frames, flashbacks, rapid dolly moves; c) the films employ Scorsese's longstanding editor Thelma Schoonmaker, and feature two of his regular actors, Robert De Niro and Joe Pesci. It is particularly Scorsese's use of Pesci which seems to have annoyed critics as the actor plays a similar role in both films and it was his *GoodFellas* performance that won Pesci an Academy Award. But while there are strong connections between Pesci's roles and his performances in *GoodFellas* and *Casino*, the two films provide the actor with distinctive characterizations. For instance, it is difficult to even imagine the Pesci character of *GoodFellas* being a caring father, which is what his character, although not without irony, is in *Casino*; also, Pesci's emotional relationship with the De Niro character in *Casino* is more complex than are any of his male or female relationships in *GoodFellas*. In any case, the fact that Pesci's roles share character traits and nar-

rative functions doesn't necessarily make *Casino* a redundant film. Perhaps the critics who have expressed a dissatisfaction with *Casino* on the basis of Pesci's presence were looking for a convenient way to dispense with what is a rigorous, sombre and demanding film.

Before dealing with *Casino*, I want to briefly discuss *GoodFellas*'s stylistics. *GoodFellas* is centred on Henry Hill/Ray Liotta, an Irish-Sicilian living in Brooklyn, who, as a teenager in the mid-50s, begins working in a menial capacity for the mob. The film covers approximately thirty years of Henry's life; in the early 1980s, Henry, realizing that he is going to be killed because of who and what he knows, accepts an offer to testify against his long time Mafia friends, Jimmy Conway/Robert De Niro and Paul Cicero/Paul Sorvino. Scorsese's treatment of the material, which can be summarized as the story of a young man's aspirations to make good and be a somebody, is wonderfully encapsulated in the film's audacious opening credit sequence. The sequence begins with introductory credits by Elaine and Saul Bass; these initial credits, which move very rapidly across the screen from right to left each being held briefly screen centre on their second appearance, are accompanied by a noise which sounds like a car on an open road speeding by. After an intertitle reading 'This is based on a true story', there is a cut to a night time shot with the camera positioned behind a moving car; there is a second intertitle, 'New York 1970', and then a cut to the inside of the car. Henry, who is driving, begins to wonder what is making the

clearly heard thumping sound which Jimmy and Tommy de Vito/Joe Pesci seem to be unaware of. There is a cut to the parked car and then a cut to the camera tracking in on the car's trunk and the origin of the thumping sound. In a rapid series of shots, a badly beat but alive man is seen in the trunk; Tommy lunges towards the man with a huge butcher knife and repeatedly stabs the man after which Jimmy shoots at the body. There is then a cut to Henry watching, a close shot of the bloodied body in the trunk and another cut to Henry as his voiceover narration begins with "As far back as I can remember, I always wanted to be a gangster." As Henry slams down the trunk cover, the camera tracks in on his face which is bathed in the red glow of the car's tail light. The tracking movement, which is abruptly halted by a freeze frame, is accompanied by an upbeat, jazzy instrumental introduction to Tony Bennett's florid rendition of the highly demonstrative "Rags to Riches". Next, there is a cut to the film's title which is in red letters on black; the film's other introductory credits follow but these, like the pre-title credits, are done in white lettering on black.

¹ The critical responses to *Casino* have been mixed. For instance, J. Hoberman in *The Village Voice* gave the film a very negative review dismissing it in part because it had too much in common with *GoodFellas*. But Todd McCarthy in *Variety* praised the film and Jonathan Romney in *Sight and Sound* argued that the film was an ambitious and complex work.

Goodfellas. Karen (Lorraine Bracco) and Henry, respectability and marriage.



The film's opening sequence is startling. The viewer is subjected to a horrifying image and, given the circumstance, the absurdity of Henry's matter-of-fact claim regarding his ambition. The sequence's violence is too graphic, intense and abrupt to be read as other than suggesting a dramatic film but Henry's voiceover commentary suggests the sequence may be establishing the film as a black comedy. The sequence is, on the one hand, lurid and suggests an exploitation film but, on the other, it is Godardian in the sophisticated way it plays with generic expectations and such filmic codes as colour, music and narration. It not only establishes the film's disturbing emotional juxtapositions but also the way in which the film will deal with its characters and subject-matter. Jimmy and Tommy are directly associated with violence and the latter is revealed to be psychotic. But these characters and the violence that they provoke aren't at any time given a subjective presentation. The viewer isn't put in the position of identifying with a violent character or someone who is the recipient of a violent act. Instead, the viewer is encouraged from the outset to relate to Henry and, later in the film, his wife Karen/Lorraine Bracco.

Following the opening credit sequence, Henry continues the voiceover narration taking the viewer back to 1955 when his involvement with the mob began. After Henry becomes involved with Karen, she, too, although to a lesser extent, is given voiceover narration. Scorsese uses their commentary as a means to give *GoodFellas* an ongoing comic edge while maintaining the film's overall dramatic conception. Judging from the narration, both Henry and Karen think of themselves as average young people who have fallen in love, settled down and are doing their best to live a normal existence. And, although the film's visuals undercut or contradict this image, Henry and Karen are, nonetheless, highly accessible characters having middle-class values and capitalistic aspirations.

The undercurrent of absurdity that at times informs Henry's and Karen's direct address responses to their experiences is given a fuller definition in the film's last third which begins with the intertitle 'Sunday May 11th, 1980'. The segment, which is extensively narrated by Henry, chronicles his hectic schedule for the day and ends with him being busted by federal agents on a cocaine trafficking charge. And the segment's frantic pacing, which is controlled by the various domestic and business commitments Henry has to fulfil as the day goes on, functions to reflect his paranoid, cocaine-induced behaviour. The segment is unlike any other in the film and, in the context of Scorsese's work, it evokes the feel of *After Hours*'s (1985) dark humour but lacks the earlier film's overtly sinister, *noir*-like ambience; here, the environment is mundane, a benign-looking suburbia.

The above-mentioned segment concludes with Henry and Karen's arrest. After a series of short dramatic scenes in which the two realize that they are going to be killed by the Mafia and offer themselves to the government as witnesses in exchange for protection, the film, in its final sequence, patently calls attention to its already extensively foregrounded stylization by further disrupting its 'realist' mode. In response to an accusation that he is an informer, Henry begins a monologue elaborating on the power he and the mob had in its glory days. Henry, as he speaks, begins to look directly at the camera; he then gets down from the witness box and walks towards the camera continuing to address the viewer. After Henry says "I know it's all over" there is a cut to a suburban housing development with the camera tracking left to right and stopping at the front door of the house Henry now inhabits under the Witness Protection Program. During the cut from the courtroom to the tracking movement, Henry's voiceover narration continues and he finishes the monologue on the front steps of his home saying "I am an average nobody, get to live the rest of my life like a snook." There is then a cut to Tommy who, earlier in the film, has been murdered by the Mafia. Tommy, in medium close-up, dressed in a flamboyant outfit which has no connection to the wardrobe he had previously worn, and looking directly at the camera, repeatedly fires bullets at the camera/viewer. Next, there is a cut back to Henry who turns his back to the camera and enters the house; as the door closes, the sound of a prison cell door being slammed shut is heard on the soundtrack. As the end credits start to roll, Sid Vicious's extraordinarily funky version of "My Way", which already accompanied the shot of Tommy firing his gun, is given full play on the soundtrack.

The stylization of the film's concluding scenes complements the opening credits. In both instances, Scorsese is playful with the material and undercuts the seriousness of the film's tone. In the film's final scenes in which Henry directly confronts the camera/viewer, Scorsese boldly acknowledges the intimacy that has been constructed between Henry and the viewer through his ongoing narration. The insert of Tommy, which to a knowledgeable viewer might suggest the famous shot of the robber directly firing his pistol at the viewer in Edwin S. Porter's *The Great Train Robbery* (1903), functions to position the film's violence and Tommy himself as 'theatrical' and as a 'construction'. Scorsese provides an almost Brechtian conclusion to the film. *GoodFellas* isn't a comedy and it isn't fully a 'gangster film' in the conventional sense. Given the film's emphasis on the Liotta character who remains, despite everything, something of the All-American boy, *GoodFellas* can be taken as a heavily ironic but sobering



version of the American success story. The film is often funny, energetic, immensely entertaining and an example of cinematic virtuosity.

As he does with *GoodFellas*, Scorsese uses the opening sequences of *Casino* to establish its thematic and tone. In a pre-credit scene, Sam 'Ace' Rothstein/Robert De Niro is seen exiting a building and heading towards a parked car; as he walks from the building to the car, Ace's voiceover narration is heard: "When you love someone, you've gotta trust them. There is no other way. You've gotta give them the key to everything that's yours. Otherwise, what's the point? And, for awhile, I believed, that's the kind of love I had." The next shot shows Ace entering the car and turning on the ignition which causes the car to explode. As flames fill the entire screen, Bach's *St. Matthew Passion* is heard and the film's credits, again designed by Elaine and Saul Bass, begin. The Basses' credits are both visually beautiful and thematically concise: the credits begin by showing Ace's body hurtling through the flames but these images are gradually replaced by a series of extreme close-ups of brightly coloured neon signs; as the credits approach their conclusion, Ace's body is again seen now falling in a spiral movement into the flames which have been superimposed on the neon.² Another superimposition is used - Ace, in silhouette, is seen standing in a casino and, as his image is lit, his voiceover narration is reintroduced: "Before I ever ran a casino or got myself blown-up, Ace Rothstein was a hell of a handicapper. I can tell you that. I was so good that whenever I bet I could change the odds for every bookmaker in the country. I am serious. I had it down so cold that I was given paradise on earth. I was given one of the biggest casinos in Las Vegas to run, the Tangiers, by the only kind of guys that can actually get you that kind of money, 62 million, 7 hundred thousand dollars." At this point, there is a cut to a shot of Mafia mobsters sitting around a table while Ace, discussing the casino set-up, says "I don't know all the details." The line of dialogue is followed immediately by a cut to a shot of Nicky Santoro/Joe Pesci and his friends with Nicky saying "Matter of fact, nobody knows all the details." Nicky then goes on to introduce himself, tells the viewer he is Ace's best friend, mentions Ginger McKenna/Sharon Stone (who is seen in an insert, followed by an insert of Ace), identifying her as the woman Ace loved and concludes the narration by saying: "But, in the end, we fucked it all up. It should have been so sweet too. But it turned out to be the last time that street guys like us were ever given anything that fucking valuable again."

Casino's opening segment introduces the film as a strictly dramatic work; it establishes the bond between Ace and Nicky and their joint narration of the film;

and, with the image of Ace's rigged car exploding, the solemn music and the content of the voiceover narrations, the film foregrounds the narrative's trajectory - the viewer is told that *Casino* is about failure, loss and death. The tone Scorsese sets links *Casino*, not to *GoodFellas*, but to *Raging Bull* and *The Age of Innocence*, and it, like those films, consistently refuses to provide the viewer with easy gratification. For instance, although *Casino* heavily employs voiceover narration, the film doesn't attempt to solicit viewer empathy with either Ace or Nicky. The two, like Ginger, the film's other major character, remain inaccessible as identification figures: Nicky is a psychotic and Ace and Ginger lack sufficient vulnerability to be fully appealing. And yet, *Casino*, arguably, provides a more deeply felt emotional experience than *GoodFellas*.

In the last third of the film, Scorsese uses less voiceover narration and thereby gives the viewer a more direct emotional access to the events that are depicted as the characters lose control of their lives and become increasingly desperate in their attempts to resolve their problems. It is significant that Ginger is never given a voiceover narration; unlike Ace and Nicky, she has no social and/or economic power and whatever personal independence Ginger had, she lost when she married Ace. And, when she realizes that she is trapped in the marriage, Ginger reacts through an emotional rebellion which is the only means she has to combat Ace. Initially using alcohol and drugs to distance herself from the relationship, Ginger moves on to toying with fantasy escapes (fleeing abroad with her ex-pimp, Lester Diamond/James Woods, and having plastic surgery to avoid detection) and, eventually, she resorts to seducing Nicky and talking him into killing Ace. The friendship between Ace and Nicky has been seriously strained ever since the two men differed over how the Tangiers, and by extension, Las Vegas itself, should be run; but Ginger functions as the catalyst that precipitates the ensuing chaos which is caused primarily by Ace's obstinacy and Nicky's greed, jealousy and desire for recognition.

Ginger's reaction to her situation is directly connected to violence and, arguably, the most disturbing violence in the film isn't the shocking 'head-in-the-vice' scene which, although hard to watch, remains an impersonal act, but, instead, the escalating abuses the three lead characters inflict on each other. There is, to begin, Ginger's self-abuse which, after she manages to break away from Ace, ends with her pathetic, drug-induced death. But, before this occurs, Ginger and Ace enact a number of harrowing scenes of domestic violence; and later, Nicky, realizing that Ginger is no longer capable of rational behaviour and intuiting that his sexual relationship with her and the plan to kill Ace

was a mistake, brutally reacts by kicking her down a flight of stairs. And, finally, in the aftermath of a federal investigation into the Mafia's connections to Las Vegas and their decision to rid themselves of possible informers, the purging of various potential informants which culminates in the baseball bat clubbing of Nicky and his brother and their being buried alive.

Ace, who survives the car bombing, provides a commentary on the deaths of Ginger and Nicky and the destruction of the Las Vegas that the three of them knew. In an epilogue, Ace, now visibly aged, apparently living alone and again working for the mob as a handicapper, seems to have found a degree of serenity. But, as the film's end credits begin, Scorsese first uses Georges Delerue's "Thème De Camille" from Godard's *Contempt* (1963) which is heard briefly earlier in the film when Ace and Ginger's marriage is disintegrating, and follows it with Hoagy Carmichael's "Stardust"; the latter, Scorsese says, he uses to "...sum up the emotions and thoughts about what you've seen."³ Given that Ace is the least overtly emotional of the leading characters and the most reflective, it is appropriate that, in the performance of "Stardust" used, the song's words are spoken. It provides *Casino* with an eloquent, elegiac conclusion - it is an ending which is completely at odds with *GoodFellas*'s ending. Scorsese's attitude towards his material is nicely summed up in the following comment which he made in response to a remark on the broad range of music the film employs: "I guess for me it's the sense of something grand that's been lost. Whether we agree with the morality of it is another matter - I'm not asking you to agree with the morality - but there was the sense of an empire that had been lost, and it needed music {*St. Matthew Passion*} worthy of that But the viewer of the film should be moved by the music. Even though you may not like the people and what they did, they're still human beings and it's a tragedy as far as I'm concerned."⁴

As in *Raging Bull*, the Scorsese film which is perhaps closest to *Casino* in temperament, *Casino* has fully rounded characters to whom Scorsese and his actors manage to give interior lives, but without providing psychological explanations for their behaviour. And, while the film belongs to the traditions of the gangster film and *film noir*, the characters aren't generic stereotypes - for instance, Ginger isn't a gangster's moll, a *femme fatale* or, alternatively, the 'woman-as-victim'. Ginger is obsessed with money and what it buys but, on the other hand, she doesn't lie to Ace, who insistently and perversely tries to romanticize their relationship, about her feelings towards him and she trusts him when he tells her that he'll let her go if the marriage fails. Ginger gambles in taking up Ace's offer but, as she later finds out, he hasn't played fair. And arguably, Ginger's

interest in money isn't primarily greed; in an environment like Las Vegas and given her profession, money is the only tangible means Ginger has to define herself and prove her worth. In contrast, Ace, like the stereotypical filmic gangster, is a dapper dresser, but in *Casino* Scorsese takes the notion to an extreme. Ace's expensive, stylish wardrobe functions not merely to signal success but also to reflect his desire to achieve perfection, to be in complete control and, through the extravagant colour co-ordinations, individualize his presence.

In addition to making the viewer deal with characters who resist appropriation, *Casino* is a lengthy film that contains footage which can be considered digressive. Early on in the film, for instance, there is a scene depicting how the Tangiers' earnings are handled, including the various skimmings that take place before the Mafia in the Midwest gets its share. On the one hand, the scene clearly isn't relevant to the plot but, on the other, the 'behind-the-scenes' procedure which is shown has a certain fascination and, indirectly, it serves to demystify the casino/gambling image. The entire scene is filmed using a Steadicam with the shot beginning in the casino proper, moving on into a back room where the money is sorted, counted and stored, and ending back in the casino as the Mafia's money is about to be taken to its Midwest destination. The camera is originally aligned to the movement of a mob member who enters the room with a suitcase to pick up the money; but, gradually, the camera begins to move freely around the busy room documenting the various jobs involved as Nicky's voiceover narration provides a description of the operation, particularly the skimmings. Although the viewer is already preoccupied dealing with the visuals and Nicky's narration, Scorsese uses the song "Moonglow" as background music and thus adds another dimension to the shot. "Moonglow" has no direct connection to what is happening onscreen or to what Nicky is talking about; the song, nevertheless, through its familiarity, filmic associations and *gracefulness* is engaging and seductive. And the shot, which is, in a strict sense, expendable, becomes an integral part of what Las Vegas was about as Nicky experienced it. *GoodFellas* employs a Steadicam shot that is expressly intended to make an impression - Henry, to avoid the line-up of people entering the Copacabana

² Whether or not it is intentional, the credit sequence contains images that evoke previous Saul Bass designs: the body falling in a spiral movement is used in Bass's poster for *Vertigo* and the flames filling the lower portion of the screen is used in the *Exodus* credits and also found in the film's poster art work.

³ Christie, Ian, "Martin Scorsese's Testament", *Sight and Sound*, January 1996/Volume 6/Issue 1; 6-13

⁴ *Ibid.*



Casino: Ginger and Ace discuss their relationship.

and to illustrate his connections, takes Karen through the rear entrance with the camera documenting their movement from the rear entry door through the kitchen and various corridors to their table. In *Casino* the Steadicam shot doesn't have a similar narrative 'justification' but it is equally a source of aesthetic pleasure and an imaginative exercise illustrating to the viewer the ability of the moving camera to record its subject-matter in a space-time continuum.

Given its concern with the demise of the mobster-controlled Las Vegas of the 1970s, *Casino* becomes a companion piece to Barry Levinson's *Bugsy* (1991) which is about Las Vegas's beginnings and, like Scorsese's film *Bugsy*, connects Las Vegas to the fate of a heterosexual couple's relationship.⁵ Set in the mid-40s, *Bugsy*, a more self-conscious period film than *Casino*, concentrates on the volatile relations between Benjamin 'Bugsy' Siegel/Warren Beatty and gangster moll bit actress Virginia Hill/Annette Bening. *Bugsy*'s version of the origins of Las Vegas is highly romantic and, by its conclusion, sentimental; Siegel, whom the film fitfully depicts as a potential psychotic, is presented ultimately as a visionary and an entrepreneur who, unfortunately, didn't live to reap the rewards of his creation. Siegel and Las Vegas are filtered through his relationship with Hill: the Flamingo, a luxurious hotel-casino he builds in the desert, becomes in Siegel's mind the gift he offers Hill who, because he cannot fully sever his ties to his wife and family, must be content to accept their illegitimate relationship. In its earlier stages the relationship is depicted as confrontational, with Hill not taking any crap from Siegel who has been used to getting what he wants but, as the relationship progresses, the two are forced to recognize that their love for each other takes precedence in their lives. Interestingly, in *Bugsy*, as in *Casino*, the relationship is placed in the context of the male making a commitment and then testing the woman through the issue of love/money/trust. Siegel has funded the building of the Flamingo with the mob's money and he gives Hill the responsibility of overseeing its construction. Hill, in turn, betrays Siegel's trust, skimming off money and lying to him when he questions her about the mounting expenditures. But, on the Flamingo's storm-battered, disastrous Christmas night opening, Hill, who walked out on Siegel when confronted about her honesty, reappears offering him the money she took and suggests that she put the money aside as their 'insurance' if things went wrong. Later the same night, Siegel is killed by the mob who, in addition to not having faith in the Las Vegas he foresees, assume Siegel has been in on the skimming. As *Bugsy* progresses, Siegel and Hill become heroic figures and the emphasis on their relationship is shifted from the sexual to the romantic; even though Hill is indirect-

ly implicated in Siegel's death, the relationship is shown to transcend the love/money/trust issue and even death itself. And *Bugsy*, too, is a celebration of Siegel's business sense - he has, after all, given post-World War II America one of its great consumerist/fantasy entertainment centres. The film's final intertitle reads: 'By 1991 the six million dollars invested in Bugsy's Las Vegas dream had generated revenues of 100 billion dollars'.

Unlike *Bugsy*, *Casino* isn't a romantic film and the personal relations between Ace, Ginger and Nicky aren't used metaphorically to glamorize either the people who inhabit Las Vegas or the city itself. *Casino* offers a historical, cultural and economic portrait of Las Vegas that isn't inviting or seductive; although the film personalizes the end of the mobsters' control of the city through the story of the Tangiers, the film doesn't suggest that a Mafia-run Las Vegas was a 'better' place than what follows. Rather, the film holds the position that the Las Vegas of the 1970s was 'honest' about what it was, unlike the present day corporate-controlled Las Vegas. The contemporary Las Vegas, in the guise of being respectable and 'family friendly', is, the film implies, an even more sinister place - an anonymous, efficiently run machine that exists solely to maximize shareholders' profits. In actuality, *Casino* is less the companion piece to *Bugsy* than it is to one of Beatty's and Robert Altman's finest works, *McCabe and Mrs. Miller* (1971), another film about America in which gangsterism is made respectable through big business.

Scorsese is a master stylist and storyteller and *Casino* is an extraordinary film. The film needs to be judged on its individual merits. In this piece, I have tried to point to aspects of the film that make *Casino* something other than a work which finds Scorsese cloning himself. *Casino* is, in its elegant imagery that is often the work of a gifted graphic artist, in its performances, which in addition to Sharon Stone's deservedly acclaimed portrayal, contains an extremely disciplined and underrated performance by Robert De Niro, in its careful orchestration of colour to create a specific period and emotional moods and in the intense concentration Scorsese imparts to the entire project, a film that ranks with the finest achievements of the decade.

⁵ *Bugsy* is something of a Beatty vehicle and in its 'outlaw couple' calls to mind his previous successes, *Bonnie and Clyde* and *McCabe and Mrs. Miller*. The film is also very much a film about Hollywood, stardom/glamour and iconographic imagery. Siegel and Hill are presented as if they were movie stars - the film blurs the line between screen character/star presence and works to enhance the star status of Beatty and Bening.



REWRITING REALISM:

Bergman and Rossellini in Europe 1949-1955

by Florence Jacobowitz

"If there is a modern cinema, this is it."

Jacques Rivette, "Letter on Rossellini", *Cahiers du Cinéma* 46, April 1955.

In 1955, André Bazin wrote "In Defense of Rossellini,"¹ in the form of an open letter to Guido Aristarco, then editor-in-chief of the Italian film journal, *Cinema Nuovo*. The Italian critics had noted, with disappointment, a "regression" in Rossellini's work, beginning with *Germania Anno Zero* and intensifying in the collaborations with Ingrid Bergman. This was not the neorealism they championed, for which post-war Italian cinema became renowned. These films were distinctly different from the widely acclaimed *Roma Città Aperta* or *Paisà*. In part, this seemed attributable to a change in attitude. Whereas these later films continue to foreground the deep sense of mourning and loss weighing on Europe, still traumatised by the massive devastation of the war, their focus is on the "completely new terms"² which defined reconstruction. How to begin again, year 0, and reinvigorate the present with meaning and authenticity, became a central thematic concern. This seemed to leave behind the emphasis on 'dialectical film-making,' of the documentation (and hence protest) of contemporary poverty and misery. Rossellini openly claimed that his conception of neorealism was "primarily a moral position which gives a perspective on the world. It then becomes an aesthetic position, but its basis is moral."³ This emphasis on morality subsequently crystallized as Rossellini's Christian humanism or Catholicism, labels often attributed to Bazin. The belief in historical truth and in the possibility of a fundamental spirituality that could be found in the material world, discredited Rossellini in the eyes of his contemporaries (and sparked the call to his defense by the *Cahiers* critics) and has become completely untenable in the 90's, following the developments in cultural theory over the last twenty-five years. Recent theory has made it impossible to speak of recognizing and identifying reality or truth because language and dominant ideological systems forever lock one's perceptions of these notions within prisms which reflect, inevitably, cultural and national interpretation. This position has contributed greatly to the demise of cultural criticism or artistic practice linked directly to active political engagement. At best one is left with deconstructing layers of meaning, foregrounding the construction of the real, or parody, signalling a cynical awareness of mythified speech.

Rossellini's art is very different - it acknowledges that reality is knowable, and it asks that one assemble the fragments of 'essential' reality offered (which includes the outer, concrete world and the inner reality of the "imagination"⁴ - the realm of fantasy, needs and desires), thus demanding the spectator's involvement as do other modernist works. As Bazin noted, "The neorealist film has a meaning but it is *a posteriori*, to the extent that it permits our awareness to move from one fact to another, from one fragment of reality to the next, whereas in the classical artistic composition the meaning is established *a priori*..."⁵ It is also rooted in commitment, in values that include a

¹ Bazin, André. *What is Cinema*. Vol.11. Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1971.

² Rossellini, Roberto. "The Intelligence of the Present." *Roberto Rossellini: The War Trilogy*. Ed. Stefano Roncoroni. New York: Grossman Publishers, 1973. xvii.

³ Maurice Schérer (Eric Rohmer) and Francois Truffaut. "Entretien avec Roberto Rossellini," Translated by Liz Heron. *Cahiers du Cinéma* 37 July 1954.

⁴ He explains this in, "A Discussion of Neo-Realism: Rossellini Interviewed by Mario Verdone," *Screen* 14 No.4 (Winter 1973-74): 72.

⁵ "In Defense of Rossellini," 99.

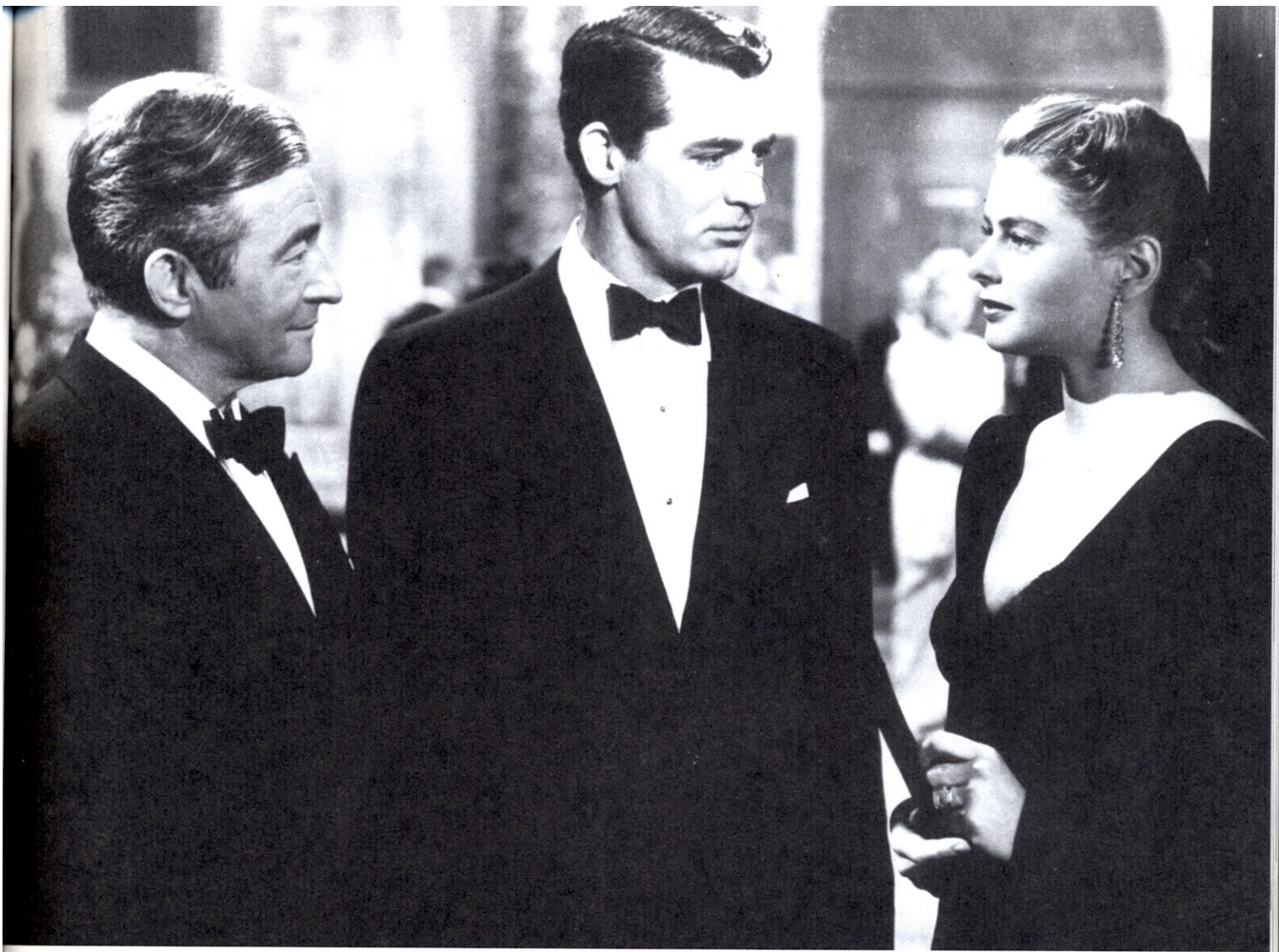
belief in social betterment, in moral responsibility in the imperative of personal accountability. The films explore the premise that active rethinking and investigation can open up new directions. The spiritual values discovered by the Bergman protagonist (be it through natural beauty, the physical sensuality of the body, the awe-inspiring surroundings - "terra di dio" - or human generosity and mutual respect) lend the films a sense of optimism and possibility, even in their bleakest moments. The films are life-affirming, ultimately, and refreshingly bereft of smug cynicism or absolute despair. This affirmation does not contradict the film's lucid presentation of current social problems. The 50's were bleak 'lead' times, marked by McCarthyism and the Cold War. The dominant conception of reconstruction emphasized the denial of past and present social conditions and a determination to anchor the future in the promise of science and technology and in familiar hierarchical class structures and configurations of marriage and family, within an environment of bourgeois conformity. The Bergman/Rossellini collaborations protest the perpetuation of these insular, authoritarian institutions and the self-serving oppressive social organization they encourage. The social criticism was still present in Rossellini's work, but it had developed into something more subtle, and less acceptable. It was no longer the neorealist call to resist fascism, but an inward questioning of more entrenched social systems and ideals.

Many aspects of Rossellini's neorealist aesthetic were still in place - he still shot quickly, without formal set scripts, demanding spontaneous invention within the framework he set up so as to capture, what he called, the "freshness"⁶ of the actors, the sense of immediacy and authentic speech needed to accompany the often on-location shooting and his respect for time and duration. It was this sense of unmediated reality, and the lack of excessive manipulation, the pared down spareness, that so charged André Bazin. This, coupled with Rossellini's methods of shooting on movement, within long takes, produced an unmistakable vitality that preserves the films' modernity so many years later.

Rossellini retained these aspects of neorealism; however the style and aesthetic evident in the Bergman films had evolved and were less easily categorizable. Although Rossellini had previously worked with star/actors like Anna Magnani (with whom he also shared a personal relationship) and Aldo Fabrizi, the collaboration with a Hollywood star like Ingrid Bergman (and the scandalous fallout which it engendered) radically altered previous conceptions of neorealism. Bergman's star persona spoke of a body of films and an array of defining characteristics sharpened in a number of significant 40's *noir*-melodramas. Bergman's intelligence and assured sensuality often challenge socially prescribed demands of the woman's subordina-

tion to the male. This collision forms the basis and propels so many of the *noir*-melodramas in which her persona resonates, notably, in works like Cukor's *Gaslight*, 1944, or Hitchcock's *Spellbound*, 1945, *Notorious*, 1946, and *Under Capricorn*, 1949, (which directly preceded her first film with Rossellini, *Stromboli, Terra di Dio*). Critics have remarked that Bergman's challenge to the status quo accounts for much of her resulting punishment: illness and madness are narrative strategies used to defuse the threat her characters pose. Rossellini uses this persona - the direct, inquisitive intelligence and integrity, the passion for life visually expressed in Bergman's striking beauty, as a cipher, an investigatory presence visually displaced in post-war Italy. Bergman's persona evokes a calling into question of gender expectations and an unwillingness to be contained or dominated. Her visual presence within the Italian landscape, as an element of style, produces immediately an aura of estrangement. Through her Rossellini presents his personal essays of a social landscape scarred by the war which had, in many ways, erased the past and the trust in the institutions of authority in which it was grounded. This is not far from what Rossellini's American counterparts like Sirk or Preminger were filming in Hollywood: women-centred fiction within the generic mode of melodrama, used to dramatize the social conflicts and tensions prevalent in the post-war world. The woman's struggle to establish a meaningful identity, her desire for fulfilment, her overwhelming alienation from her immediate constraining environment, are familiar generic concerns. The sense of feeling estranged at home takes on additional meaning when set against the 'moral wreckage' left in the wake of the war. Melodrama points to this kind of abyss - a world no longer operating along clear moral guidelines - and is often concerned with the resultant problems of identity which surface when social mores and delineated gender roles have been badly shaken, demanding redefinition. Melodrama is often presented in terms of metaphor and allegory. It dramatises emotional terrain, sensations which cannot be named easily. Melodrama is a useful mode to probe when performance and *mise-en-scène* are used expressively to compensate for the lack inherent in language and representation. This is precisely how Bazin describes the manner in which Naples is used in *Viaggio in Italia*.

It is Naples "filtered" through the consciousness of the heroine. If the landscape is bare and confined, it is because the consciousness of an ordinary bourgeoisie itself suffers from great spiritual poverty. Nevertheless, the Naples of the film is not false (which it could easily be with the Naples of a documentary three hours long). It is rather a mental landscape at once as objective as a straight photograph and as subjective as pure personal consciousness.⁷



Notorious: Bergman's definitive role in the 40's Hollywood cinema as the transgressive woman.

Rossellini uses the landscape expressively and a supreme example of this is found in *Stromboli, Terra di Dio*.⁶ *Stromboli* begins with the premise that Karin's marriage to an Italian fisherman is one of convenience; it is a strategy she uses to escape her claustrophobic existence in a displaced persons' camp, following her disappointment of having been refused a visa to South America. The film elides the nuptials (aside from a brief telling shot where she looks away from her husband Antonio/Mario Vitale during the ceremony) and concentrates on Karin's arrival on the island of Stromboli, a rugged isolated place where the inhabitants are condemned to impoverished living conditions and are dependent upon the whims of an active vol-

cano which threatens their very existence. The narrative is centred upon Karin's exploration of her newly-acquired entrapment on the barren island with its strict, authoritarian rituals, gender rules and fears of difference. Karin's sophistication and urbanity, her modernity, set against the stark landscape of maze-like alleyways, primitive dwellings, barren of vegetation, is jarring and produces a visual dissonance which conveys the protagonist's terrible sense of isolation and estrangement. Karin's experience metaphorically speaks of the hardships familiar to many displaced and deracinated after the war who were forced to rebuild their lives within the alienating surroundings of a rigidly codified and conformist post-war society. The film

⁶ "Entretien avec Roberto Rossellini."

⁷ "In Defense of Rossellini," 98.

⁸ I will be citing examples from the first two collaborations only, *Stromboli, Terra di Dio* and *Europa '51* (released in America as *The Greatest Love*) because of limitations of space. I base my reading of *Stromboli* on the Italian version which ends with Bergman alone on the volcano, as opposed to the RKO version, where the voiceover suggests that Karin returns to the village. The RKO version also edits out a number of shots that do not contribute to 'plot' development, as well as beginning with shots of a map and the island of Stromboli prior to the scene in the refugee camp.

documents the experience of displacement, of being trapped, of having to wait, of the resultant feelings of anguish and frustration. It is authentic in the way it captures what it feels like to be alive at a particular time in history. Rossellini does this by filming the island in a realist, sometimes documentary-like style but the aesthetic serves as a visualization of an 'experiential' landscape, of Karin's journey of self-discovery through her interaction with life on the island. Rossellini's choice to film on Stromboli, an inherently melodramatic island of elemental extremes centred upon a volcano which spews fire, earth and dust, allows the director to rely on a realist aesthetic, instead of distorting or overloading the mise-en-scène as is often the case in expressionist art or melodrama. Rossellini clearly distinguished what he was after from Flaherty-esque documentary realism as an end in itself. Responding to a critic's comment that documentary footage was edited into the tuna fishing sequence, Rossellini states:

That episode is certainly not documentary film; what's more, I shot it myself. I tried to reproduce that endless wait in the sun, then that dreadfully tragic moment when they kill it: that death that explodes after a wonderful, shameless, lazy, I would say benevolent wait in the sun. It was what was important, from the point of view of character.⁹

It is there for the audience to observe, as Karin does, the sensation of time (the wait in the sun) and the island's almost casual acceptance of death as part of its quotidian existence. The sequence demonstrates a part of Karin's education and rediscovery of the material, physical world around her and also serves to isolate her from the rituals of the male group which she rejects.

Many sequences in the film are used in a similar way - they are not structured along the tension of what-happens-next, characteristic of traditional narrative realist art. In fact, one can isolate and remove important sequences in the film without disturbing the unfolding of the narrative. They are there to illustrate Karin's position and response to her environment. A prime example follows Karin's shock after first viewing her husband's familial home and her subsequent refusal to live there. There are a number of long takes, simply of her crying. (Similar shots are repeated towards the end of the film when she attempts to leave the island and finds herself lost in the smouldering ashes and mists of the volcano.) She then composes herself and, imagining that she has heard a child crying, she leaves the house and is visualized through a series of high angle shots, wandering lost in the back alleyways of the island. (Many of these moments were edited out of the American version of the film as nothing 'happens' - beyond the film's insistence on registering Karin's despair and emphasizing, visually, that there is no exit.)

The high point of melodramatic spectacle, prior to the film's finale of Karin's escape, is the eruption of the island volcano (which was fortuitous for Rossellini as it obligingly took place during filming, though it tragically claimed the life of the assistant director). The eruption mirrors Karin's irrepressible nature, and foreshadows her impending explosion in her refusal to follow the law of the land which is to wait passively and accept whatever devastation and uncertainty a whimsical God or fate has to offer. The logic of the narrative, structured by shots of Karin within the world around her, culminates in her refusal to wait. She has tried to re-establish an identity on Stromboli and a semblance of vitality as she knew it. Karin's attempt to redecorate and reshape her living space by painting flowers on the bare whitewashed walls of her home, by bringing in cacti and removing the madonnas and familial portraits (all later replaced) produces a fundamental challenge of which she is not aware - she is rejecting the woman's lack of place, her domestic invisibility. The male world is one of activity and the children can play and enjoy the sea. Karin visits these sites and crosses boundaries where she is not welcome. Her bold communication with other island outcasts (the 'loose' woman, the lighthouse keeper) is equally threatening. Karin is punished, ultimately, for impudently breaking the strict conformist codes of the island and bringing shame and humiliation to her husband. Karin's yearning for freedom and self-expression is not a woman's concern.

Karin's lack of freedom is visualized in the way her physical space shrinks from the limits of the island to the confines of her home, when her husband literally nails the doors and windows shut, forcing her to sit still and wait. The eruption of male violence and confinement is characteristic of gothic melodrama, connected with the Bergman persona in films like *Gaslight* or *Notorious* where the husband tries to both confine and kill her, a generic source from which *Stromboli* draws.

The narrative ends with Karin alone on the volcano, confronting her social and natural environment, protecting the new life within her and demanding that God help her. Many have criticised the ending of *Stromboli*, when Karin calls out to God; Rossellini lucidly accounts for her actions:

...And for the same reasons as *Viaggio in Italia*. A woman who has been through the war, through both collaborationism and the concentration camps, and has been clever enough to find *all* the right answers, comes to a point where she finds herself lost in a maze. What she does is to sit down and cry like a child, and it's the only sane thing left she could do, the only tiny spark of something human and alive. If a child is crying, if he's banged his foot, he makes just the same noise - 'Oh mummy,' 'Oh God' - it sounds just the same.¹⁰

(The film supports this reading because Karin does not find salvation within the confines of the church. Her call to God is for something beyond organized religion. It is an expression of her pain.) Karin finds her ability to transcend the constrictions of the social world and looks instead with wonder to the beauty in the natural world around her, to the new life in her body, but that's as much resolution as can be offered. It ends with a 'turning point'.¹¹ Rossellini's version does not have her go back home as the more conventional American melodrama does. Karin is still alone, suspended outside of the community but not completely despairing. She is ravaged by the journey, but survives and has gained some insight along the way. Bergman's star-strength lends a potency to the possibility of the woman's struggle and survival. Because *Stromboli* is not plot driven, it is unimportant whether she makes it to the other harbour or whether it is possible, realistically, to climb a still active volcano. The emphasis is on experiential history.

Although *Stromboli* dramatizes the profound emotional journey Karin undergoes, the film maintains, as Rossellini noted, "a documentary style of observation and analysis."¹² The spectator is not offered a psychological explanation, a device important to building character identification within traditional realism. In fact, identification is very circumscribed and detached - one watches the Bergman protagonists move within their environment, affected by the setting around them. The characters are not flawless, idealised heroines, which further acts to block traditional identification. Karin is prone to anger, impatience and intransigence. She will exploit the men around her for the power they hold: Antonio for his offer of marriage, which is a ticket out of the camp, and the priest (and later the lighthouse keeper) are both approached sexually, for their ability to take her off the island. The film supports her logic, despite her choice of means: as Karin says, it makes more sense to use resources to salvage the living.

Rossellini claimed that *Germania Anno Zero* was conceived for and around the shots of the child, Edmund, wandering through the ruins of Germany.¹³ That image encapsulates what the film is there to dramatize - the experience of feeling alone, and orphaned in a devastated landscape. One identifies with the child's discovery of a world without guidance. Identification becomes a means of understanding, as Rossellini explains, "an attitude" or "how behaviour can be determined by a particular historical climate or situation,"¹⁴ unlike the more traditional narrative which privileges the personal against a particular historical backdrop.

A number of Hollywood melodramas use this distanced form of identification in much the same way. Ophüls' *The Reckless Moment*, 1949, is a prime example. There too one watches the protagonist move

through her environment - a domestic world in which she is confined, characterised by denial, and a social world in which she is demonstrably impotent without her husband. One identifies profoundly with Mrs. Harper and her position, but one is distanced at the same time. She moves blindly, trying to make sense of events, slowly gaining glimmers of awareness. The tension erupts from her increasing inability to manage her social duties and her innermost needs. Stylistically as well, Ophüls' aesthetic is marked by camera movement and longer takes centred on the protagonist within her world, suggesting the relationship between human acts and their social determinants. *The Reckless Moment* too, leads to non-resolution, offering only the thinnest, impossibly bitter happy ending.

The Rossellini/Bergman collaborations borrow from the narrative constructions of the 50's melodrama to highlight the predicament of a heroine who is rejecting the terms of bourgeois marriage and many of the values within which it is anchored. Far from burying the scandal of Bergman's abdication of her status as wife and mother through her abandonment of husband and child, and diminishing the glare of public outcry and debate caused by the couple's transgressive love affair and the ensuing birth of their children, the films point to the events by articulating the fundamental issues in which they are embedded. They peel away the protective mystifying layers that naturalise the notion that middle-class marriage is the woman's ultimate goal and place of fulfilment. (Rossellini once noted that "it is a fairly normal thing in modern society that many marriages are limited companies under another name."¹⁵) *Stromboli* presents marriage as an error in judgement, born of the traumas of the camps. In *Europa '51*, Irene's process of healing through self-discovery and social engagement destroys the terms of her marriage, and *Viaggio in Italia* estranges the marriage by placing the couple in a foreign country, cut loose of the security of familiar mores and surroundings. In *Stromboli*, Karin rejects the notion of sacrifice as a guiding value, and yearns for self-fulfilment while she is still young and alive. In *Europa '51* Irene reinterprets the concept of sacrifice within a broader social context of outer-directed love and generosity.

Rossellini's commitment to documenting and incorporating authentic experience and the reality of his immediate surroundings, included his star/wife.

⁹ "Entretien avec Roberto Rossellini."

¹⁰ Adriano Aprà and Maurizio Ponzi. "An Interview with Roberto Rossellini." *Screen* 14 No.4 (Winter 1973-74): 113.

¹¹ "An Interview with Roberto Rossellini," 114.

¹² "A Discussion of Neo-Realism," 72.

¹³ "A Discussion of Neo-Realism," 73.

¹⁴ "The Intelligence of the Present," xvi.

¹⁵ "An Interview with Roberto Rossellini," 113.

The films acknowledge the star's professional history and personal history. Like many of her protagonists, Bergman was the Swede/northerner displaced in a country where passion and expressive behaviour often override the repressions of the north. She was the star fresh from Hollywood, trained to strive for a notion of acting and performance which was often at odds with Rossellini's conception of authentic speech, a de-emphasized psychological portrait of a character and his habit of using a star of Bergman's calibre amongst non-professional actors. Personal history becomes inextricably embroidered into social history. Both are interdependent in the reality he sought to discover. As Rossellini believed that personal behaviour and activity is "determined by a particular historical climate or situation," it made sense that his realist cinema traverses the borders which distinguish fact from fiction, professional from amateur, public from private. The work becomes intensely marked by its authors, in this case, two strong collaborative artistic presences.¹⁶

Neorealism discovers in Rossellini the style and resources of abstraction. To have a regard for reality does not mean that what one does in fact is to pile up appearances. On the contrary, it means that one strips the appearances of all that is not essential, in order to get at the totality in its simplicity. The art of Rossellini is linear and melodic.

André Bazin,
"In Defense of Rossellini," 1955.

Bazin's description sounds elusive, but it comes close in capturing the films' style. Although often melodramatic, they are not hyperbolic or marked by emotional and visual excess. Instead, the films use an aesthetic rooted in abstraction - they strip away the encumbrances and demands of plot development, character construction. The narratives are often elliptical, leaving out expected plot essentials and focussing instead on a protagonist's response to her environment. In *Stromboli*, for example, the emphasis is on duration - watching Karin waiting, feeling her boredom and frustration - underlined in lengthy sequence shots where the story drifts, and thus the sense of estrangement intensifies. The time spent on registering the day-to-day routines on an island where nothing much happens in the social world, contrasted against the whims of the natural one, is the film's story. This different kind of narrative can be attributed to Rossellini's attitude towards realism: "the realist film has the world as its living object, not the telling of the story."¹⁷ The story of *Europa '51* is its title - a precise historical moment

and accompanying social conditions contribute the plot and narrative. What does it feel like to be in Europe in 1951? What does one see and what responses, which actions are appropriate? The story is, as Bazin describes, both linear and melodic - linear in the sense that the protagonist is on a journey or trajectory of self-discovery and melodic in the way the films elaborate on themes through key visual moments. In *Europa '51*, Irene moves beyond the material comforts of the bourgeois apartment and the insular self-directed world it represents, towards active outer-directed social involvement visualized in her venturing into the slums and factories of Rome. What these characters discover when familiar social trappings and securities are stripped away, is that they are alone and without a place in society. The characters reach a point which makes returning to the status quo impossible. This is characteristic of woman-centred melodramas: the women struggle to accommodate their needs and find an identity with which they can live, and in the process, collide with the institutions that will not tolerate their deviance.

This collision is central to *Europa '51*. Bergman's Irene Girard, an American living in Rome, is introduced as a bourgeois socialite, preoccupied with her own hermetic privileged class. In the opening shots she is seen driving, with her pet dog prominently in view in the back passenger seat, and is annoyed when the doorman in the lobby of the expensive apartment building where she lives informs her that the elevator is not working. Her life and world view is traumatically shaken by her son's suicide attempt. He survives, but dies shortly after from a complication resulting from the fall. Irene's journey is born of personal trauma and mourning but is familiar to her contemporaries in Europe in 1951; she attempts to reinvest her existence with moral integrity and social value, and thus redeem her life. In order to achieve this Irene is willing, ultimately, to sacrifice her husband and protected bourgeois privilege for a larger, needier social group. Her self-abnegation is an inversion of the conservative melodramatic heroine's as she rejects her self-centred privatized home and opts for a life of active commitment to the less fortunate. In fact for Irene, her decision to live morally and responsibly satisfies her need for self-realization. In the eyes of Europe, 1951 (and not much has changed), Irene's choice is viewed as a form of madness, and she is rewarded with a future of secured confinement behind bars, which makes clear the authorities' intolerance of her rejection of the norm, of her difference. Rossellini, however, aware as he is of the irony, proceeds to present Irene as a modern hero.¹⁸ According to Bergman, the character was conceived as a contemporary St. Francis.¹⁹ (This was not unfamiliar to the persona - Bergman had already played a nun, however sensual, in



Europa '51: Irene's discovery of a world outside of her own in the streets of Rome.

The Bells of St. Mary's and *Joan of Arc*, a role she was to repeat for Rossellini in his recording of the production of Paul Claudel's oratorio in which she starred, entitled *Giovanna d'Arco al rogo*/*Joan of Arc at the Stake*.) Although Irene is incarcerated finally, she has won the admiration of a diverse group made up of the disenfranchised - working-class, poor or outcasts, like the prostitute - of Rome.

Irene's journey of healing is presented as a process of reawakening that develops in stages through her contact with those outside her class. Irene establishes a friendship with a woman, "Passerotto"/Giulietta Masina, who lives happily in a self-fashioned family consisting of herself and her six children (three of her own and three she 'picked up'). Her commitments are to herself and to her family, which she has chosen not to be dominated by a husband/father. Interestingly, the woman senses Irene's alienation and mistakes her for a displaced person, which she clearly is. After first meeting the woman and her children, Irene returns home and informs her husband/Alexander Knox, with breathless excitement, "George, I have discovered a world I had no idea existed," to which he responds, "You must slow down and take some rest...It breaks my heart to see you like this..." When she continues to try to inform him of her new discoveries, he replies with his usual patronizing platitudes, "Sweetheart, do exactly as you please." Irene is attracted to the woman's vitality and describes her to her cousin Andrea/Ettore Giannini as a "courageous, intelligent woman, full of life." When the woman chooses a date with a new lover over an opportunity of factory employment, Irene's first response is one typical of her class - she is disappointed with her

¹⁶ A number of post-war filmmakers/artists use autobiography or biography as an entry point to exploring contemporary social politics. (The list is long but one can include Margarethe von Trotta, Diane Kurys, Chantal Akerman, Art Spiegelman, Christian Boltanski, amongst others.)

¹⁷ "A Discussion of Neo-Realism," 71.

¹⁸ Many have remarked upon the similarities between aspects of Irene's experience, like the dehumanizing day of factory labour, to those reported on by Simone Weil. See the chapter on *Europa '51* in Peter Brunette's *Roberto Rossellini*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1987.

¹⁹ "Ingrid Bergman on Rossellini." Interviewed by Robin Wood. *Film Comment* July 1974: 13.



Europa '51: Irene's incarceration.

priorities. She believes at this point that through work the woman will achieve a better life, and so reluctantly agrees to attend the factory in her place for a day. Rossellini films the segment in a grainy, newsreel-like style which foregrounds the layers of the real: Irene/Bergman the statuesque star enters the factory with a group of actual factory workers, creating a visual dissonance, which signals the centrality of the 'real' social world to the fictional narrative. Irene's day of labour in the factory is a shocking experience for her. She learns to comprehend the working woman's position and to reject the mind-numbing working conditions by living it, directly, from a vantage point shared by the working-class. Irene returns home late and dishevelled from her first experience of deglamourized employment, too exhausted to partake in the leisure class's pastime of attending the theatre on a regular workday. Her condemnation of the factory-worker's enslavement is even derided by Andrea, a Communist who is well aware of the exploitation of workers. Irene insists that the problem is more deeply rooted and must be addressed beyond the framework of Marxism.

Irene chooses a path outside those sanctioned by established social or political communities. Although Andrea is the first to trigger her enlightenment regarding the oppression of capitalism and class struggle, Irene makes it clear that he has "opened" her eyes despite his ideas. Marxism teaches her the need to renounce bourgeois notions of self-serving need bought at the price of exploitation, and to redirect her energies and resources towards helping oppressed social groups, but it lacks the spiritual component - a love that is all-encompassing and eternal, and extends beyond the material world - for which Irene yearns. Irene defies her class by rejecting the comforts and privileges offered through her family. This defiance becomes increasingly threatening, and Irene's mother warns her: "I've seen a lot of strange books and newspapers around the house...You mustn't forget who you are...You know very well how they've been investigating all those people...you have certain responsibilities towards your family." Irene endangers their social position by drawing unwanted publicity, which also challenges their economic power (they are a family of prominent American industrialists). Mr. Girard's lawyer clearly states this line of reasoning when insisting on her being committed to the mental institution. In addition to endangering Mr. Girard's reputation, her decision to abandon her home of her own free will (much as Ingrid Bergman did at the time) proves her madness.

Irene defies the priest and the laws of the church and organized religion which demands control of its saints, by her simple compulsion to love and feel compassion for those in need, beyond her immediate family. Although the priest acknowledges her motives as being in line with true Christian spirit, he points out that her

methods are outside the rules (and hence control) of the church, and he urges her to sacrifice her desires and to change. Irene lucidly identifies the priest's call to change as one of intolerance: "Who are we to dare to change...?" Sensing a witchhunt when she is later being interrogated on her powers to calm a suffering woman and her strong spiritual compulsion to save others, Irene denies that she is possessed by the power of a saint (saints are awarded their titles after their deaths) and suggests that her actions are born of contempt for her former identity and the world she has left behind. Irene defies the police and their laws by counselling a young robber to escape first and then make the decision to give himself up of his own free will. She rejects the clinical world of science and technology which hopes to explain her deviance through a barrage of futile psychological tests and observation, through her unwillingness to cooperate and thus condone it.

Irene's decision to share her life with those who need her (and she discounts her husband from this group) is an expression of her desire for absolute freedom: "When you are bound to nothing you are bound to everybody." Ironically her desire for the freedom to do what she wants is her ultimate transgression. It points a finger at the inequities of dominant social hierarchies which serve the interest of the empowered few.

The prologue building to the child's suicide attempt is critical to the narrative. It is not there simply to provide the catalyst which will account for Irene's decision to seek salvation as a form of penance for her guilt, for feeling responsible for Michel's death. The intense relationship between mother and son triggers Irene's trajectory, and the loss Irene suffers fuels it. Michel's deviance from the norm is registered from the start. Both parents chastise his unwillingness to comply with expected gender behaviour. His mother tells him that he is "acting like a little Mamma's boy" and "it's time that he grew up." She acknowledges his "extreme sensitivity" while her husband less generously complains of his inability to manage the child, embarrassed by his repeated calls for his mother which interrupt the dinner party and publicly display his childishness. (The film points to the underlying hypocrisy by setting the father's complaints of his son's behaviour against his play with his son's new train.) His solution, typical of his class, is to force a separation between mother and son and to send Michel to boarding school, which will cure him of his 'sensitivity'.

Michel rejects his father and other male authority figures (he complains that his new male teacher "talks too much, and gets too close") and voices his yearning for his mother. This is made explicit in a crucial scene when he is recuperating from his fall and longs for the time in his childhood when he was alone with his mother, when his father was absent during the war.

Ironically this idyllic romanticized time was also a traumatic one of air raids and bomb shelters. Nevertheless, both mother and child recall it with pleasure, recounting the memories while cuddling together alone in Michel's bed. Irene asks him if he is happy, which Michel clearly is. She continues saying "We are together - just like we used to be when you were a little baby," reminding him of when they slept together then, keeping warm, etc. She continues to recount wartime memories, gently kissing him and then says, "And do you remember when father came back home from the war?". Michel sadly responds, "And from then I didn't see you as much...", and Irene cries, "But I'm with you now, I'll stay with you always..." The significance of the moment - of Irene's recommitment to her son - is underlined in a long take.

Michel's suicide attempt is framed within the context of his sense of loss - of the bond with his mother which excluded the father - and of his demand to restate the bond. The image where Michel contemplates suicide, expressed in the shot of his reflection in his mother's mirror, when he places her gold chain around his neck, not only points to his mother (she later wears the chain as a bracelet) but to her status as her husband's property and to his ownership. This strategy of visually announcing the wife's status as her husband's property through her jewels and furs is common to melodrama. When Irene and George learn of Michel's fall, Irene's fur coat is retrieved by the maid (her car keys are in it) but the fur, which shows up later in the hospital, emphasizes both class privilege and Irene's identity as her husband's possession. Michel's suicide attempt is an expression of his protest. Irene is not her own person - she lacks this basic freedom which will be resolved by the choices she makes.

Both mother and son are aligned in the way they reject the father's position of entitlement. (In fact, they are later aligned again when Irene's mother complains of Irene's response of hiding when things go wrong; George answers, "Same as Michel.") Logically, Irene's process of healing, of not hiding, of addressing her mourning and loss, begins with a rejection of her home. Her need to love never extends to her husband. She justifies this by claiming that he doesn't need her as much as the others, but the rejection is still clear. George and the priest interpret this within the dominant ideological self-centred understanding as Irene's love being redirected towards another man. In fact, Irene's radical method of righting her past is to reject that role as a *raison d'être*. If anything 'the greatest love' (as the English version is called) is a love for humanity which is rooted in her love for her child, Michel. Irene states this clearly and the concept is subtly reinforced in a scene in the hospital when Irene soothes the woman who has attempted suicide by lying

with her, as she did with Michel, echoing the earlier scene by saying softly, "I'll stay with you."

The child's suicide attempt, in part resulting from his isolation and loneliness, is comparable to the child's suicide in *Germania Anno Zero*. It expresses the sensibility of feeling uncared for and orphaned and acts as a call for rethinking traditional concepts of the family. *Europa '51* recommends a social world which will value caring for the disempowered and disenfranchised across various groups, and will rebuild itself outside of existing institutions of authority and outside of class hierarchies. Irene's self-centred bourgeoisie, oblivious to anything or anyone outside of her limited milieu, is finally completely divorced from this incarnation and the class it represents. Only her former maid comes to the hospital distraught and in tears demanding, "Why did they do this to you...it is so unfair." Irene ends up physically behind bars, punished for her transgressions, but is emotionally bound to her new family.

The Bergman/Rossellini films have sometimes been described as "documentaries of a face."²⁰ (This is not unusual in the work of many of the great stars who were known for their distinct performance styles - their roles as great actors - like Ingrid Bergman, Anna Magnani or Bette Davis.) It seems this way because most of the shots in these collaborations are constructed around the Bergman protagonist, registering her response to her social world; the films' exploration of post-war reconstruction uses her as their emotional and moral core. Her refusal to wait, her willingness to renounce decency for her own voice and needs, her challenge to normative gender laws, her visual displacement in her surroundings, estrange the familiar and satisfy perfectly the films' call for reflection and renewal.

Not surprisingly, *Europa '51* offended and continues to offend. Bergman's audience, still shaken by the scandal of a wife/mother who left her husband and child, found the qualified 'heroine' of these films difficult to embrace. Left of centre Marxists were offended by the intrusions of gender and morality into the problem of class struggle and contemporary critics insist on misreading the social analysis of the protagonists' oppression as a symptom of the author's misogyny. Rossellini's new concept of looking at the reality of a time and place beyond the bounds of private and public, fiction and document, was revelatory. Its reconception of realism - its use of a star persona and elements borrowed from melodrama and the woman's film - allows for the important inclusion of experiential history in the representation of an era. Rivette's identification of these films as a modern cinema still resonates.

²⁰ Mario Ponzi made this comment in reference to *Europa '51*, "Due o tre cose su Roberto Rossellini." *Cinema e film* 1 No. 2 (Spring 1967): 25. Cited by Peter Brunette in *Roberto Rossellini*, 139.

Style and Narrative

in Bertolucci's *The Conformist*



Marcello (Jean-Louis Trintignant) denies Anna (Dominique Sanda) help

by Michael Walker

In part, this essay is a continuation of my article 'Melodramatic Narrative' in *CineAction* 31 (Spring/Summer 1993). Using Griffith's *Orphans of the Storm* (1922) and Ford's *The Searchers* (1956) as my main examples, I argued there that a past 'traumatic event' in a film — usually but not always in someone's childhood — tends to generate a certain sort of narrative, in which the event is echoed, in different ways, within the text of the film, until the trauma which initiated the action could be 'healed' by a changed set of circumstances. I am going to argue that *The Conformist* (Bernardo Bertolucci, 1970) has a similar structure but, in order to do this, I will need to refer much more than in my earlier examples to the film's visual style (*mise-en-scène* and editing) as well as its narrative. As has been frequently noted, *The Conformist* is a very stylish film indeed, and this style fuses with the film's similarly richly-textured narrative to provide an unusually powerful and complex whole.

At the time of the film's release in the UK, Bertolucci himself referred to its style in terms of influence: "One could say the point of departure (of the film) was the cinema, and the cinema I like is Sternberg, Ophuls and Welles"¹. In summary, this refers to a highly elaborate and sensuous visual style: Sternbergian lighting, Opulsiian camera movements, Wellesian cranes. Nevertheless, whereas certain elements of the film's style — e.g. the different visual allusions to the metaphor of Plato's cave — are features of a conscious aesthetic discourse, there are other elements which seem unconscious. As T. Jefferson Kline among others has noted², the film is peculiarly oneiric in feel, providing material for psychoanalytical readings which explore beyond Bertolucci's conscious design.



Marcello and Giulia (Stefania Sandrelli): the engagement embrace

The Conformist is based, in terms of plot quite closely, on Alberto Moravia's 1951 novel of the same name. But the narrative of the two works is radically different. Most of the film has a complex flashback structure, with past events recalled by Marcello Clerici (Jean-Louis Trintignant) during a long car journey from Paris to the South of France. Moravia's novel, by contrast, has a linear narrative, beginning with Marcello as a boy and ending at the time of Mussolini's downfall in 1943. Most of the film's key events are nevertheless from the novel: the incident in which the 13 year-old Marcello thinks he's killed the chauffeur, Lino, who tried to seduce him; his becoming a Fascist; his marriage to the petite bourgeois Giulia; his plan to use his honeymoon to visit his old professor, Luca Quadri, now an anti-fascist exile in Paris, to spy on him; the change of orders, with Marcello now being told that Quadri is to be murdered; Marcello's attraction to Quadri's young wife (here called — rather pointedly — Lina); her unexpected departure with her husband which results in her being assassinated as well. The major plot difference is in the ending. Although the miraculous reappearance of a live Lino is introduced at the same point in the story (the day of Mussolini's downfall), Marcello in the novel is then killed, along with his wife and child, in a plane attack on his car as

he flees Rome. As Bertolucci has pointed out, this ending continues Moravia's preoccupation with 'the forces of destiny', whereas he himself sought to substitute a more psychoanalytical pattern on the events in Marcello's life³. Kline's article includes a detailed discussion of the process of adaptation from novel to film.

On *The Conformist*, Bertolucci used Franco Arcalli as his editor for the first time. He has spoken enthusiastically of Arcalli's contribution: "In a matter of days he assembled the first few sequences of *The Conformist* and I immediately fell in love with it. Kim (Arcalli) is the person who is responsible for having made me discover what editing can really be. He led me by the hand into a world I had always perceived as a necessary evil. It turned out to be an exhilarating discovery"⁴. The excitement of Bertolucci's discovery of the power of editing is apparent in the film's extraordinary first half hour, as the narrative flashes back from the car in which Marcello is being driven by Manganiello (Gastone Moschin) to catch up with Quadri (Enzo Tarascio) and his wife Anna (Dominique Sanda). During these early flashbacks, Bertolucci cuts repeatedly back to Marcello in the car — sometimes several times during an individual flashback scene — as well as intercutting two separate flashback scenes together. Although these are evidently events Marcello is remem-

bering — some are, indeed, recalled in stages — the effect, in Yosefa Loshitzky's words, is like "the Freudian concept of free association, in which ideas occur to one spontaneously, without straining"⁵. As a consequence of Bertolucci's psychoanalytical restructuring of the novel, the flashbacks are overtly subjective/oneiric which explains, for example, why Dominique Sanda should play three different roles: Marcello remembers the three women as alike because he psychically links them (I'll suggest why later).

In its opening shots, *The Conformist* evokes two contrasting cinematic traditions: *film noir* (the flashing neon sign outside the hotel where Marcello sits in the dark) and *La Vie est à Nous*, Renoir's 1936 film about the Popular Front in '30s France (what it actually says on the sign). From the former comes stylisation, expressionist lighting, a complex flashback structure and a corrupted hero caught up in a *noir* world of duplicity and betrayal. From the latter comes politics: not the left-wing, working-class politics of solidarity of the Renoir movie, but an examination of its opposite: the politics of '30s Fascism.

The story of Plato's prisoners in the cave provides the dominant political metaphor for the film. The essence of the myth of the cave is that the prisoners mistake the shadows of reality for reality itself. The film relates this to the experience of people under Fascism: when Marcello tells the story back to Professor Quadri, the latter immediately connects it to Fascist Italy: "Shadows — the reflections of things — as you experience in Italy today". At the same time, the way Bertolucci stages this scene — described in detail by Robert Phillip Kolker in his book on Bertolucci⁶ — implicates Quadri himself in the mistaken perception. When Marcello enters Quadri's study and closes the shutters, he explains his action in terms of recreating the conditions under which Quadri used to deliver his lectures. But he has another purpose. Quadri has just asked him a searching question: "I'm curious: you've come all the way here to see me?" By closing the shutters, Marcello is not only avoiding the question, but hiding his insincerity in the darkness. He then goes on to use the darkened room as a dramatic setting for his evocation of Plato's cave. At first, he remains in the darkness; only when he receives a positive response from Quadri does he move into the light to continue the story. By judiciously inserting his own duplicitous gloss — "How like them (the prisoners) we are" — Marcello wins Quadri over. He concludes his story with a lament "You left (Italy) and I became a Fascist", and Quadri immediately objects: "A convinced Fascist does not talk like that". In effect, Quadri here is responding to the 'shadows of reality' Marcello has created before him.

The ways in which the film uses Plato's myth as a metaphor is discussed by Andrew Britton⁷ and

analysed in detail by Millicent Marcus⁸. Andrew Britton cites the broadcast at the beginning of the flashbacks — which includes a 'talk' by Marcello's friend Italo (Jose Quaglio) which is pure Fascist propaganda — as one such example. "The radio broadcast conveys an 'impression of normalcy' to its listeners, and the essence of their experience of it is their blindness — they cannot see what they hear. A link is at once established both with Italo's literal blindness, and with the film's central image of Plato's cave... The glass partition here becomes an analogue of the wall, and of the cinema screen, on which we 'see only the shadows projected on the back of the cave...' The image allows us to experience more than the radio listeners, and simultaneously gives us a figure of that extra experience through Marcello, who wishes to be absorbed into the normalcy on which the scene beyond the glass gives us a (critical) perspective." Andrew Britton goes on to analyse the stages of the broadcast: three female singers in identical dresses singing "Who is happier than I?"; a man doing imitations of bird calls and Italo's talk itself, in which "he speaks, not of a political, but of a spiritual alliance, a mystical union authorised by Nature... between two images — 'the Prussian image of Mussolini, the Latin images of Hitler'. The progress of the broadcast may be summarised thus: unsurpassable happiness (the song) and Nature (the bird imitations) can reach their mutual zenith in a preordained spiritual union (the Axis)" (pp. 9-10).

Millicent Marcus cites examples in the film which develop the metaphor further. As Marcello waits in the Ministry hall-way for an audience with the Minister, men carry Fascist emblems past him: a large bronze eagle; a large bust. These are the equivalents of the "statues of wood and stone" which Marcello says were carved along the top of the wall in the story of the cave, and they are examples of the monumental symbols of power used by Fascism to give an inflated sense of the state. This thread in the film is then completed when, on the day in 1943 when Mussolini falls, his bust is dragged through the streets of Rome by men on a motorcycle.

¹ Bertolucci on *The Conformist*. An interview with Marilyn Goldin in *Sight & Sound*. Spring 1971, pp. 65-66.

² T. Jefferson Kline, "The Unconformist" in *Modern European Filmmakers and the Art of Adaptation*, eds Andrew S. Horton & Joan Magretta (Frederick Ungar, 1981).

³ Goldin interview, p. 66.

⁴ Donald Ranvaud & Enzo Ungari, *Bertolucci by Bertolucci* (Plexus, 1987), p. 72.

⁵ Yosefa Loshitzky, *The Radical faces of Godard and Bertolucci* (Wayne State UP, 1995).

⁶ Robert Phillip Kolker, *Bernardo Bertolucci* (BFI, 1985).

⁷ Andrew Britton, "Bertolucci: Thinking about father" in *Movie* 23 (Winter 1976/77).

⁸ Millicent Marcus, *Italian Film in the Light of Neorealism* (Princeton UP, 1986).

Immediately before this penultimate sequence, we see Marcello, Giulia (Stephanie Sandrelli) and their young daughter in their Rome apartment. It is, in fact, the apartment where Giulia used to live with her mother (Yvonne Sanson) (now presumed dead — we see her photograph on a dresser), but it looks completely different. Not only are they having to share it with at least one other family, but it is very dark, as if Fascism has taken the whole country into darkness. And the effect of the latter is to suggest that Marcello and his family are now living in the darkness of Plato's cave. But this is also a reflection of the psychology of the hero. Throughout the film, Marcello is consistently more comfortable in the dark than the light. The scene in Quadri's study is only one example: the film begins with him sitting in the darkness, just as it will end with him in the semi-darkness. In the radio studio, he remains in the darkened room overlooking the broadcast studio itself; on the train he suddenly draws down the blind when Giulia starts to confess her past sexual relationship; when he interrupts Anna's ballet class, he abruptly drags her into a darkened adjacent dressing-room. These and other examples suggest that Marcello's 'conformity' extends to his being like one of Plato's prisoners, at home in the dark.

This is re-emphasised when Marcello leaves the apartment to go and meet Italo. As the people celebrating the downfall of Mussolini shine searchlights, headlights, etc., in the darkness, Marcello is uneasy, hiding his eyes from the lights, as if they threaten to expose him. Then, after meeting Italo, Marcello experiences a genuine return of the repressed: a live Lino (Pierre Clementi), who, at this point, is propositioning a young male prostitute. In a stunning example of projection, Marcello starts accusing Lino of having committed the Quadri murders: as if, psychically, he feels that he only became a Fascist assassin because of the childhood incident with Lino. (In other words, the incident drove him to a hysterical need to assert normality that made him embrace Fascism to the point of murder.) This sends Lino fleeing into the darkness, whereupon Marcello turns on Italo, accusing him of being a Fascist and striking him. As if summoned up by Marcello's unconscious, a crowd singing in the celebration of the end of Fascism pass by and spirit Italo away.

This leaves Marcello alone with the prostitute. In the film's final shot, he turns to look towards the boy, who is now waiting naked on a bed. Marcus once more invokes the metaphor of the cave: "The young man lives in a niche in the Colosseum whose source of light and heat is a fire just outside the iron grating that serves as his door. When Marcello gazes upon the young man, fire, niche and bars provide the equivalents of the setting for Plato's prisoners enchained in the cave". But, since Marcello turns to look towards the back of the

cave — the location, in the story, of the deceptive shadows — Marcus is obliged to note the ambiguity: "Is Marcello embracing the shadows or the light in accepting his latent sexual inclinations?" (p. 301).

My feeling is, if we have a coherent discourse here, then with the collapse of the political manifestations of 'shadows of reality', Marcello is cast adrift. The crowd of singing people who sweep past — and spirit away his one close Fascist friend — emphasises this. He turns, as a consequence, inwards, but now the cave contains not shadows, but a real, live, object of desire. The cave is used symbolically in many ways in literature and film, but one of the strongest associations is with the repressed, the unconscious — like the Malabar caves in *A Passage to India*. That I think is what we have here: Marcello's turning towards the boy indicates his confronting of *his* repressed, his homosexuality.

As stated, this thread in the film seems quite consciously worked through by Bertolucci. However, the aspects of the film which enable it to be linked into my argument about 'melodramatic narrative' seem to function at a deeper, more intuitive level. In contrast to the past traumatic events in the Hollywood films I cited, all of which where either pre-narrative or at the beginning of the films, here the equivalent event is narrated about 25 minutes into the film, sometimes held to be the point at which a film narrative typically takes a new turn. In it, we see the 13-year-old Marcello (Pasquale Fortunato) molested by a group of boys whilst adults, including Lino, a chauffeur, look on. Lino follows Marcello in his car, Marcello allows himself to be picked up, and goes with Lino — who promises him a gun — to Lino's room at the top of a large, seemingly deserted, mansion. Lino starts to seduce Marcello, Marcello starts to respond, then suddenly picks up the gun and shoots, hitting Lino (blood on his right cheek) and, he thinks, killing him. He escapes through the window.

As with the Hollywood examples, the narrative registers the trauma in the way the material returns. In *The Conformist*, the main example of this is the scene when Marcello visits the brothel at Ventimiglia. Bertolucci signals the 'otherness' of this scene visually: as Marcello arrives at the brothel, a dissolve makes him seem to enter it through a painting, as if entering a different diegetic space. We then have a series of echoes of the traumatic event. First, at the gate he meets and is saluted by three sailors: for his encounter with Lino, he wore a sailor suit, i.e. just as he is now an adult, these are like adult versions of his childhood self. Second, Manganiello as Lino's replacement as chauffeur (who has come from nowhere) offers him a scarred prostitute, whose scar on her right cheek marks her as Lino's replacement as object of desire. This is Dominique Sanda's second appearance (earlier she played a woman being ravished by the Minister) and clearly Bertolucci



The traumatic event: Lino (Pierre Clementi) shows the young Marcello his gun.

cast her in the role as a bridge to Anna, making the link between Lino and Anna more overt. Just as Marcello will say to Anna when he meets her that he saw a prostitute who looked just like her, so here his sudden, intense embrace suggests she (maybe unconsciously) reminds him of Lino. (This becomes clearer when he remeets Lino and finds he's scarred on his right cheek.) The embrace is interrupted by Raoul (Christian Alegny), summoning him to hear the change of plans: now Quadri is to be murdered. The third echo is the way Marcello picks up the gun he's offered by Raoul: he puts on his glove, as, to shoot Lino, he put on Lino's chauffeur gloves. The fourth is when he then seems about to shoot Raoul, and histrionically points the gun around the room, as he had when he shot Lino. The fifth is when he realises he's somehow mislaid his hat: when he left Lino's room, he left his sailor boy's hat on Lino's bed.

The pattern of events here is that Marcello goes into a brothel and emerges as a man with a gun and orders to kill, i.e. murder has supplanted sex. This is quite close to the childhood version of going to Lino's room on the promise of getting a gun, finding this means sex, and emerging — as he thinks — a murderer. And there is a final, structural, link between the two scenes. At the point in the car journey when Marcello recalls the Lino incident, the narrative structure of the film changes. Up to this point, Bertolucci has continually

cut back and forth between Marcello in the car 'remembering' and the images of the past. As the Lino incident unfolds, the cutting back to Marcello in the present ceases; from this point the narrative remains 'in flashback' until the flashbacks end. This obviously privileges the incident — as if, once it has forced itself back into Marcello's consciousness, other memories flow more readily — but it also enables Bertolucci to structure the incident in a distinctive way. He intercuts it with Marcello's cynical confession to a priest on the eve of his wedding; in effect, the incident — the salacious content of which greatly excites the priest — becomes the focus of the confession. And the Ventimiglia sequence is similarly 'framed' by Giulia's confession to Marcello. She begins it in the train journey before the Ventimiglia stop, and continues it during the resumed journey. And her confession, too, concerns sexual transgression, with herself — like young Marcello — allowing it to happen.

What does all this mean? I argued in my earlier article that this sort of compulsive re-enacting of the original material leads to a *melodramatic* narrative, in which events are driven by an unconscious pressure on the narrative, forcing it in certain directions and, specifically, to certain climaxes and crises. But, since the films themselves were generically melodramas, this was essentially a way of 'making sense' of their narrative climaxes. As an 'art' movie, *The Conformist* is

clearly quite different. Although the echoes may still be read as a narrative form of the return of the repressed, they are much more the product of Bertolucci's introduction of a psychoanalytical slant on his material, together with the characteristic art movie features of overt stylisation, aesthetic self-consciousness, thematic density and introspective narration. Here the echoes privilege the childhood 'traumatic event' in a similar way to the Hollywood examples, but they need to be read in more specifically Freudian terms. Kline mentions the "repetition-compulsion" pattern to the novel⁹, and the film translates this into a more overtly Freudian form; as if Marcello is caught up in events which compulsively echo his past trauma because it set up disturbances which have not yet been resolved.

This becomes clearer if we look at the assassination scene and consider the ways in which it, too, may be seen as an echo of the childhood incident. In fact, the film has a conscious link here: as mentioned, Anna Quadri is Lino's replacement in the narrative. In the novel, Moravia's calling her Lina makes this explicit. The link is the character's homosexuality: Anna is explicitly lesbian — or, at least, bisexual — and the scene in which she sits on the floor and makes sensual advances up Giulia's naked legs is overtly an echo of the way Lino sat on the floor and similarly embraced the young Marcello's legs.

As a result of the brothel scene, there has been a crucial change of terms from the childhood incident. Whereas the 'killing' of Lino was transgressive, that of Quadri is now the subject of a Fascist order. But Marcello shot Lino to deny his homosexuality, and his acceptance of the order to kill Quadri derives from the same impulse: to prove he's a good Fascist, i.e. in his terms, normal. In this respect, it is surely crucial that, although he is guilty of conspiracy to murder, he is not guilty of the actual murders of Anna and her husband. He's *not* a good Fascist: Manganiello calls him a coward, which he, Manganiello, equates with being a pervert or a Jew. This reflects this particular example of the return of the repressed: insofar as the material does echo the childhood incident, it is done by displacement.

I believe there are indeed echoes in the assassination scene, which may be seen in the nature of the two killings. The thugs stabbing Quadri can be seen as a reworking of the boys molesting the young Marcello: both end up on their backs surrounded by their attackers. (In his entry on Bertolucci in *Cinema: a Critical Dictionary*, Robin Wood asks "Why is the assassination of Quadri staged to evoke the death of Caesar?"¹⁰. Perhaps Bertolucci's — unconscious? — wish to related the two incidents led to the need for such a staging.) Symbolically, the boys, grown up,

have become Fascist thugs; only now their victim — in Fascist terms — is a political rather than a sexual 'deviant'. (Implicitly, Marcello was molested because he was seen as effeminate: this is explicit in the book.) This not only emphasises the link Bertolucci repeatedly makes between Fascism and the suppression of deviance, but suggests that the father-figure is being punished in revenge for the way Marcello was sexually humiliated. In this respect, the thugs are like agents of Marcello's Superego.

Similarly, when Anna flees from the murderers to the protection of Marcello in the car — which echoes the young Marcello seeking the 'protection' of Lino from his attackers — Marcello shuts her out: another act of violent repression. At this point, Anna becomes like Lino. Her ensuing pursuit by the thugs *up* through the woods may then be seen as another echo: of the 'innocent' chase between Lino and Marcello from the car, across the grass and *up* into the house: the wind in the trees may be heard on both occasions. It's as if the false innocence of the childhood incident is re-enacted in a nightmare version; again, the thugs seem like agents of Marcello's Superego, punishing Anna for her homosexuality. When they catch up with her, she is shot, and — in a final, explicit, echo — her bloody face echoes Lino's. However, I would agree with Robin Wood's reservations about the way this scene is filmed: "Why the blood all over Anna's face when she appears to have been shot in the back... blood that has mysteriously diminished a few shots later?"¹¹. Kline quotes Bertolucci in an interview as saying he deliberately used excessive amounts of blood so that "audiences could think 'it's not true'..."¹², a tremendous failure of nerve on the part of a director who seems completely on top of his material throughout the rest of the film.

That the childhood events are here being echoed by displacement is emphasised by the fact that, although Marcello now has the gun (the present Lino promised him) he is incapable of using it. Whereas Lino watched the boys molesting Marcello from a position of power, standing on his car's running-board, Marcello cowers in the back of the car as Quadri is killed and Anna, distraught, appeals for his help.

In closing the car window on Anna, Marcello is shutting out the sexual deviant: keeping her on the other side of the glass. (There is perhaps a link here with Italo on the other side of the glass at the beginning of the flashbacks. Although this is never made explicit, most critics seem to agree that Italo is gay.) But, of course, Marcello also desires Anna, which is partly Oedipal (see later) but, more crucially, precisely because of her androgyny. His desire — anticipated in the sudden attraction he feels for the whore in Ventimiglia — may be seen as a 'permitted' expression of his repressed homosexuality, permitted because she's a woman. With

Giulia, Marcello is sexually rather coy, but with Anna he is extremely aggressive, suggesting a desperation, as if he's driven by forces beyond his control. And so we have here a classic example of ambivalence, of a character divided between conflicting impulses. At the point when he refuses to save Anna, the Superego impulse to repress triumphs. At the end of the film, with the Fascist Superego swept away, the Id triumphs.

A crucial difference from the childhood incident is the role of the chauffeur: here Manganiello. The sexually enticing Lino has been converted into the sexually enticing Anna, but his persona as chauffeur has been relocated with the Fascist heavy Manganiello. This continues the split that was noted in the brothel in Ventimiglia: Lino has been divided into two characters: Manganiello as chauffeur and Dominique Sanda as erotic object. We can make sense of this in terms of the film's transformation of the sexual (Lino, with his gun enticingly between his legs as a come-on) into the political (Manganiello, for whom a gun is used purely to kill and the object between *his* legs is used to urinate in disgust at Marcello's failure to do this). On his first appearance, when he seems to be following Marcello on foot in his car, Manganiello is linked in the latter's mind to Lino in his car: this accounts for the sudden introduction of the canted camera angles — they indicate Marcello's unease. As soon as Manganiello identifies himself as a secret agent — i.e. a political, not a sexual figure — Marcello relaxes and the canted camera straightens up. When, during the car journey, Bertolucci then re-uses the image of Manganiello driving behind Marcello on foot to trigger the memory of Lino driving behind the young Marcello, this is little more than a convenient association: Marcello's unease has gone. The only moment when unease returns is when Marcello hides in the toilet in the Chinese restaurant in Paris and pulls his gun on Manganiello. Given the setting, and Marcello's pointing the gun at the chauffeur, it's as if, again, he is re-enacting elements of his encounter with Lino.

With the film's third chauffeur, Alberi, who is also Marcello's mother's lover, there is more oblique echoing of the childhood incident, with Signora Clerici (Milly) in the equivalent position to Marcello. Alberi's weapon of seduction is a morphine needle rather than a gun, but it's similarly deadly. Just as he did to Lino, Marcello makes a point of attributing deviance to Alberi, and he gets Manganiello to dispose of him — as he himself did with Lino. Moreover, Signora Clerici's house — with its steps up the front — suggests the house in which Lino sought to seduce the young Marcello. When Manganiello beats up Alberi by the car, this may be seen as a reworking of Marcello's past so that the 'deviant' chauffeur is disposed of before he gets to the bedroom and becomes

seductive. Each chauffeur's car is parked in a very similar position in the grounds in front of the respective house, and with Alberi, too, we note the motif of the discarded hat; this time the chauffeur's. (Again, as in a dream-reworking, there has been a displacement.) As Manganiello hits Alberi, Marcello becomes very animated, running up the steps into the house and saying "Tell the Colonel he can count on me", i.e., your efficient disposal of the deviant makes me keen to demonstrate *my* Fascist credentials, too.

Once this pattern of repetition-compulsion in the film is grasped, it should be clear why Bertolucci felt the need to jettison Moravia's ending; to find a resolution which enabled Marcello, potentially, to come to terms with his repressed demons. The extreme emotional violence of the re-encounter with Lino — to say nothing of the way Marcello, as if in psychic recognition of the link between the events, blames Lino for the Quadri murders — bears testament to the forces which are surging through Marcello as he experiences, for the first time consciously, the return of his repressed feelings. In hysterically driving Lino away — *up* the steps of the Colosseum — and allowing the crowd to spirit Italo (his Fascist conscience) away, Marcello in effect sets the scene for the act which will enable him, if not to heal, at least to confront the crucial feature of the past traumatic event. As he turns to gaze at the prostitute — Lino's replacement as young man — it is not simply the myth of the cave that is suggested, but also Marcello and the barrier and the 'deviant'. But the film stops at this point. Here Bertolucci is deliberately leaving his hero poised: we cannot say whether Marcello really will be able to cross the barrier and embrace the male object of desire.

The killing of Quadri, a father-figure; the desire for Anna, his wife; the disposal of Alberi, the mother's lover: these are equally the sort of Oedipal elements one finds repeatedly in Bertolucci's movies. But there is a separate group of such elements which provide another slant on the hero; which focus more on his identification with the Fascist state. Marcello's own father (Giuseppe Addobatti) is an inmate in an asylum, driven mad, it is implied, because of Fascist depravities in his past (one of the film's many references to the Fascist practice of using castor oil as a torture weapon). And the way Marcello torments him with the memory of these clearly suggests Oedipal hostility. Ultimately, he goads his father to the point where the latter strikes out impotently at him. Signor Clerici then calls out for the

⁹ Kline, p. 229.

¹⁰ Robin Wood, "Bernardo Bertolucci" in *Cinema: a Critical Dictionary*, Vol. 1. ed Richard Roud (Martin, Secker & Warburg, 1980), p. 128.

¹¹ Wood, p. 128.

¹² Kline, p. 225.

Marcello and Anna in Paris.



attendant Franz and puts his arms in position for the strait-jacket he's wearing to be bound. His submissiveness, and the readiness with which Franz, the authority-figure, resorts to the use of the jacket, expresses the control of the state over its victims. But, crucially, Marcello himself provokes the whole incident: he wants to see his father so humiliated. He aligns himself with the repressiveness of the state.

The décor of the asylum is a vast white enclosed arena of marble benches, one of the film's examples of Fascist architecture, harking back to Rome's imperial past, massive and impersonal. Other notable examples in the film of Fascist décor are the Ministry and the brothel: the latter a scaled-down version of the marble

monumentality of the former. And in these venues, too, Marcello bears witness to a Fascist authority-figure and a dominated subject: specifically, Dominique Sanda being sexually propositioned by a man. In the Ministry, he spies on the Minister and an elegantly-dressed woman who lies on his desk and offers her body to him. Kline perceptively relates this to the primal scene, noting the visual link between the woman's leg dangling under the table and Signora Clerici's leg under the bed when Marcello fishes out the morphine syringe¹³. The scene when Marcello enters his mother's bedroom is, moreover, Oedipally charged: he complains about her state of undress; she says she's just had a dream in which he came through the door

and kissed her. When she insults Giulia, both of them laugh, connoting a mother/son complicity at the expense of the son's fiancée. This heightens the sense that, when Marcello spies on the Minister and Sanda, the latter, a highly glamorous figure, substitutes for the mother in the Oedipal configuration. This scene is then echoed in the brothel in Ventimiglia: another Fascist authority-figure (Manganiello); Sanda again the subject of the figure's (here bullying) attentions. But this is not as direct a version of the primal scene as the one in the Ministry. Here Marcello is not a surreptitious observer, and Manganiello — in a very unpaternal way — offers him the whore. It's as if the primal scene has been reworked in terms of an Oedipal fantasy, culminating with the 'mother' surrendering to the ardent embrace of the 'son'. Nevertheless, both these scenes are followed by a demonstration of Fascist authority which locates Marcello, too, as submissive subject. He is summoned before the Minister, and led towards the man at his desk by two deferential officials who speak in whispers in their superior's presence. In the brothel, Raoul's interruption of Marcello's embrace is so commanding that it converts him into a scampering schoolboy, eager to obey. And so, not only do these versions of the primal scene include Oedipal overtones, but also, as in the scene with Signor Clerici, these are linked to the power structures of the state with which Marcello identifies and to which he submits.

Bertolucci himself, however, has spoken of another scene as evoking the primal scene: when Marcello spies on Anna making erotic advances up Giulia's naked legs. "It's a scene that suggests a homosexual seduction traversed by an erotic shudder. But beyond the specific narrative meaning, this situation brings to mind the primal scene. I feel, at this point, that all my cinema may be incorporated into this scene"¹⁴. If this *can* be seen as a representation of the primal scene, it is one onto which another Freudian primal phantasy — the 'scene of seduction' — has been grafted. Laplanche and Pontalis summarise the links and differences: "If we consider the themes that are present in primal phantasies... the striking thing is that they have one trait in common: they are all related to the origins... In the 'primal scene', it is the origin of the subject that is represented; in seduction fantasies, it is the origin or emergence of sexuality..."¹⁵. The scene's precise echoing of the Lino/Marcello seduction scene locates it as representing the latter far more than the former. On the other hand, its relationship to the earlier scenes in which Marcello spied on Dominique Sanda in a sexual situation cannot be ignored. She has moved — in the switch from Italy to France — from the passive to the active sexual partner, and she is also now transgressing gender boundaries. She is still linked to the mother: Signora Clerici's bedroom

was filled with dogs; here, Marcello finds Anna's dog guarding the entrance to the bedroom. But the authoritarian structure that characterised her appearances in the scenes in Italy is no longer in evidence.

When Marcello encounters Manganiello and Sanda as whore in the brothel, the latter declares that she's "completamente pazza" (completely crazy). The utterance, which Manganiello forces her to repeat, is bizarre, with no apparent connection to anything. However, when Marcello resumes his train journey with Giulia, and she resumes her story of her teenage seduction by sixty year-old 'Uncle' Perpuzzio, she uses the same phrase: to justify his seduction, Perpuzzio declared that he was "completamente pazzo" over her. Now, as Giulia tells her story of the stages of Perpuzzio's seduction, Marcello imitates them. And we could see what he's imitating as yet another representation — here oral — of the primal scene. In other words, Marcello has sex with his wife for the first time (a) in imitation of one of the Italian authority-figures and (b) with her echoing the words of the mysteriously desired whore. Giulia herself virtually disappears behind the fantasy-substitutions.

On the one hand, the identification of the hero with the power structures of the Fascist state is thus detailed and sophisticated: as if he has internalised them in his psyche. It seems quite logical that his mission, as agent for the state, should be to commit an Oedipal crime. On the other hand, Bertolucci suggests something willed about Marcello's commitments: his marriage to Giulia *because* she's so ordinary; his identification with Fascism *because* it makes him feel 'normal'. During the party in the blind people's home immediately before his wedding, Marcello asks Italo what he thinks a 'normal man' is. The conversation takes place in a basement room which has windows above head level; through these we see women's legs walking to and fro outside. And so, when Italo replies that a normal man is one who turns to admire a woman's backside and finds that other men have done the same, Bertolucci is using the proximity of the women pointedly to ironise such a comment from a blind man. Italo goes on to say that a normal man likes "crowded beaches, football matches, bars" and Marcello adds "And mass rallies". But one cannot imagine Marcello having any attraction whatever to mass rallies. The story he tells Italo in the opening flashback about his father's past in Munich — which mocks Hitler as a lunatic who made wild political speeches — seems much closer to his position.

Bertolucci also ironises his hero's commitment to

¹³ Kline, p. 232.

¹⁴ Ranvaud & Ungari, p. 192.

¹⁵ J. Laplanche & J.B. Pontalis, *The Language of Psycho-Analysis* (Hogarth Press, 1973), p. 332.

Fascism in the way he captures Marcello's strutting self-importance within the Fascist world: e.g. when he visits the Ministry, or when he marches by a huge monument, erected to celebrate the military victories of Augustus, with whom Mussolini undoubtedly wished to compare himself. Even the camera cranes in the Italian scenes serve to reinforce Marcello's inflated sense of his own power. This is particularly in evidence in the two matching cranes in front of his mother's house: as he comes out to order Manganiello to get rid of Alberi, and as he goes back in again declaring that the Colonel can count on him. There is a rhetoric here which is pointedly over-emphatic: Bertolucci is ironising his hero's sense of his own importance.

In Paris, all this changes. Marcello still dresses similarly — tight overcoat and fedora — but, rather than strut, he becomes a besotted lover, stalking Anna as she takes Giulia shopping, whilst simultaneously trying to avoid an overzealous Manganiello. As he marched by the monument, he bore aloft a bouquet of yellow roses for Giulia. As he walks down the street with Anna when she comes out of the hotel, he similarly carries a posy of "violets from Parma", but now he's uncomfortable, unsure of Anna's response. The *mise-en-scène*, too, changes. The flamboyant cranes of the Italian scenes cease; the Parisian scenes are characterised, rather, by elegant tracks and dollies — the Ophulsian influence. (The cranes return, significantly, for the assassination scene: specifically, as Quadri is murdered.) But if, from one point of view, this is a more sensuous world — as in the flowing camera movements in the Joinville dance hall — it is also one that is more troubling for the hero. Marcello's interior scenes alone with Anna — in her bedroom; in the ballet change-room — are accompanied by shots in mirrors which separate the characters by placing them in different spaces. And it is Marcello who tends to be located only in the mirror space: when Anna is seen in reflection, she is also usually framed in front of the mirror at the same time. In the changing-room, Bertolucci uses these framings when Anna is attacking Marcello for his Fascism: she ends by calling him a spy and an informer. In France, and from Anna's point of view, the perspective on Fascism has changed: now it's as if Marcello, by his commitment to Fascism, has located himself in an imaginary mirror world. There are similar overtones to the myth of the cave scene in Quadri's study. Marcello brings the darkness of Plato's cave, symbolically the darkness of Fascist Italy, into the Professor's world.

But in the changing-room it seems, for a moment, as if Anna's scorn has stung Marcello: as the camera pans away from the mirror to show him 'directly', he says he'll give up his mission. Anna's behaviour at this point becomes strangely contradictory. Instead of pressing him on his change of heart, she refutes it — "You're too

much of a coward" — but she then strips off the top of her leotard to offer herself to him. Goldin points out that the lighting at this moment is "a sinister blue-green (which) makes her ugly", and Bertolucci says in reply "When she undresses she is going to the slaughterhouse; which is why I used that light"¹⁶. But this doesn't account for Anna's contradictory behaviour, nor why her offering herself should so fail to move a Marcello who only moments before was asking her to run away with him. He embraced the Ventimiglia whore with far more fervour than he musters for Anna here. It is no doubt significant that, as Anna stands before him, for the first time Bertolucci frames both of them exclusively in the mirror space. Clearly this suggests the illusory basis of her action. But it doesn't explain it.

To conclude, I would like to return to my comment that the opening suggests an homage to *film noir*. It would only require a shift in generic point of view to see Marcello as a *noir* hero, in flight from his anxieties about sexuality, embracing Fascism as a (false) solution to these anxieties and becoming corrupted by this association with a gangster world. As in many *films noirs*, he is married for the sake of conformity to a domesticated woman, but yearns for the sexual allure of the '*femme fatale*'; a role Anna comes close to playing in her attempts to manipulate Marcello in her pursuit of Giulia. It is true that Bertolucci uses (parodic) *noir* imagery in Marcello's first scene with Giulia rather than with Anna — the bizarre slatted effect of the lighting in her mother's apartment — but in many respects Anna is like a *femme fatale*: married to a father-figure; sexually liberated; glamorous and exciting. But, by the end of the film, it is apparent that Fascism is the equivalent of the *noir* world, and that Anna — potentially, at least — could have been the person who saved Marcello from that world. But this solution is offered in the film only in the dream Marcello recounts to Manganiello. And another element in the dream is that he was blind, and required Quadri to cure him. This, of course, is what Marcello resolutely refuses. He remains 'blind', and, even at the end, when he turns towards both the male object of desire and the camera, there is no evidence that he has gained any self-awareness other than a recognition of his homosexuality. In making his hero look directly and uneasily into the camera, Bertolucci stresses the unresolved quality of the ending. It is not inconceivable that, in the film's Oedipal design, Marcello has become 'like' his father, imprisoned, not by a strait-jacket, but by the image of the bars through which we observe him.

¹⁶ Goldin interview, p. 65.

Doll Tearsheet (Jeanne Moreau) and Falstaff (Orson Welles).



MAINTAINING THE DUAL PERSPECTIVE:

Orson Welles and *Chimes at Midnight*

by Peter E.S. Babiak

The idyllic landscape fades in as a slow yet cheerful tune played on a recorder appears on the soundtrack. Pure, white snow stretches off into the distance and a barren tree dominates the screen. As Falstaff and Shallow enter the on-screen space, reminiscing with one another the atmosphere seems contented and warm. A.G. Pilkington believes that this is Orson Welles's way of signalling to us " ... that *Chimes at Midnight* was about the ... pure image of the lost paradise." (144) Pilkington further notes that this scene " ... seems a moment of peaceful reverie, symbolic of all of those other bits of still beauty time has flicked away." (145) Still reminiscing, the two men proceed indoors, sitting and warming themselves before the fire in the grate. The overall mood of warmth is reflected in Falstaff's smile as he settles before the fire. Shallow is giddy and joyful as he reminisces. He states "Jesu, the days that we have seen." Falstaff warmly replies "We have heard the chimes at midnight, Master Robert Shallow." Like a giddy child, Shallow rapidly replies "That we have, Sir John. That we have, that we have, that we have."

Jack Jorgens cites Welles as stating that the central theme in western culture is that of the lost paradise (110), and believes *Chimes at Midnight* to be a lament for just that. Although the above described prologue sequence to the film initially seems evocative of warm remembrances of things past, the film to follow will prove that this prologue serves to evoke a lost paradise that never really existed in the first place. The warm and evocative vision of Falstaff and Shallow as they wander through the unsullied landscape will be proven a hoax by subsequent events. The world of *Chimes at Midnight* will prove to be a world where human values such as tenderness and affection will be marginalized and suppressed by political values such as the need to consolidate and maintain political power. Shallow will be revealed to be an archetypal figure that Anthony Davies cites Russian film-maker Grigori Kozintsev as characterizing to be "... not only an insignificant man, he is the Great Insignificance" (127). Falstaff will eventually become the forgotten father. The elegiac prologue to the film presents us not so much with the actual reminiscences of Falstaff and Shallow as it does with a potential of something that could have come into being if circumstances had been different. The present image of the giddy and enthusiastic Shallow will later be usurped by that of an irritating and mean-spirited old man who is insensitive to the pain of an old friend who has just received the most crushing blow of his life. The present image of the warmly smiling Falstaff who sits by the fire will be replaced by that of a lonely old man who dies in despair. Any potential for warmth, joy, and affection in their lives will be crushed by historical forces that are beyond their control. Jack Jorgens writes:

Shakespeare ... lived in a period of transition from the Middle Ages to the Renaissance. He looked back on the feudal system, with its sense of divine order in the universe and purpose in history, its land-based economy and static social order, institutions, and hierarchies, its widely though not universally accepted values and body of knowledge expressed in Latin. But he also seemed to intuit the decay of that order and the shattering impact of protestantism, empiricism, capitalism, nationalism, and the explorations of the New World which gave birth to the modern world ... This double perspective permeates Shakespeare's *Henry IV* plays ... By revealing different aspects of the action and by moving characters from one situation to another, Shakespeare forces us constantly to change perspective, to shift our sympathies, to reassess cumulative meanings. The ultimate realist, he traps us in a maze of emotions, ideas, and motivation - pride, fear, ignorance, ambition, love, duty, pragmatism, idealism, imagination - which

bears little resemblance to the simple moral framework of Holinshed. (106-108)

Shakespeare's use of the dual perspective secures him a unique position within the canon of western literature. He is simultaneously acclaimed as the greatest writer in the western canon, yet he is also subversive to the method of storytelling through the use of cause and effect narratives and protagonists who provide the audience with easily accessible identification figures, which so decisively permeates the western canon. In adapting Shakespeare to the screen, the bulk of western film-makers rework the texts to the effect that the finished product will conform to popular expectations of what a narrative is and what a protagonist is supposed to do. In bringing *Chimes at Midnight* to the screen, Welles saw his challenge as a film-maker differently, and has managed to preserve the dual perspective despite the fact that he boils some five plays and roughly twelve hours worth of material down to a film of slightly under two hours in length. Along with Peter Brook's film of *King Lear*, Welles's *Chimes at Midnight* deserves recognition as the finest filmic representation of Shakespeare's work that we have in the English language.

Welles maintains the dual perspective by juxtaposing three perspectives in the film against one another. First, there is the perspective of "the official record" as represented by Ralph Richardson's voice-over narrations from Holinshed's *Chronicles*. Secondly, there is "the normative version of events", as represented by Shakespeare's text, which Welles employs here as the version of events which, though not quite coinciding with "the official record", is considered by the majority of persons within a given social context as being the most credible version of events. The final perspective that Welles employs is that of the people who are marginalized by the shift from the medieval to the modern world. It is almost axiomatic that the historical record reflects a bias of being related from the point of view of the winners in the struggle for political power. Welles, to an even greater extent than Shakespeare ever did in the *Henriad*, admits the point of view of the losers into *Chimes at Midnight*, and presents us with a version of history that is far more balanced than that of Branagh or Olivier.

The effect of this juxtaposition is realized within the first five minutes of the film. The elegiac prologue sequence is immediately followed by the credit sequence, where the wistful music of the recorder gives way to the energetic music of drum and flute. We are presented with shots of the Boar's Head tavern, men riding swiftly on horseback, and a column of soldiers struggling to march against a harsh, winter wind. We then see an image of hanged prisoners swaying on gibbets while men stand on the ground below them men-

acingly brandishing clubs. This shot is accompanied by the title, "Narration Based On Holinshed's Chronicles Spoken By Ralph Richardson". This image couples the perspective of the official record with oppression and brutality directed against those who oppose the agenda that it represents. A narrative disparity is thus created between the possibility of an idyllic winter as represented by the prologue sequence and a harsh and brutal winter as represented by the credit sequence. The film that is about to unfold will depict the realization of the possibility that is present in the credit sequence, and the negation of that which is present in the prologue.

The opposition of these possibilities is reflected in many ways throughout the course of Welles's film. Anthony Davies argues that the *mise-en-scène* of this film portrays a dialectic between wood and stone. Davies notes that the architecture of the tavern, which Falstaff inhabits, is constructed out of wood, whereas the architecture of the court, which Bolingbroke inhabits, is constructed out of stone. Davies argues that Falstaff, when he is ultimately rejected by Hal, is outside of his native element and within a *mise-en-scène* that shows him surrounded and seemingly crushed by stone. (130) The wood associated with Falstaff is an organic and living element whereas

the stone associated with Bolingbroke (who represents the major source of spiritual repression in the film) is an inert and dead element. Our first image of Bolingbroke sitting in his throne as he denounces the Percys is shot from below, showing him surrounded by stone walls and emitting a frosty breath in his cold environment. Bolingbroke's relationships with others in the film are depicted in terms of his physical and spiritual distance from them. The people he deals with are physically unable to touch him as he is seated high above them. When we first meet him,





Prince Hal (Keith Baxter)

he sits above the Percys and bluntly rejects their suit, ultimately provoking them to rebellion.

Conversely, the tavern is depicted in terms of frequent physical displays of affection. When we first meet them, Hal awakens Falstaff, then lies down with him in bed. Their mock quarrel over Hal's theft of the reckoning is resolved with an explosion of joyous laughter accompanied with an embrace. An embrace also follows Falstaff's statement that Hal owes Falstaff his love, which is worth a thousand pounds. The physicality of relationships in the tavern is not simply limited to displays of affection. There is a nurturing aspect in Hal's dressing of Falstaff for the robbery at Gadshill, and there is a tactile dimension to Hal's tossing of the autumn leaves over Falstaff as they prepare for the robbery. The senses of physical affection, physical nurturance, and tactile play have no place in the world of the court. They are marginalized by the intrusion of the dominant social order that Bolingbroke represents into the world of the tavern and are seen as subversive to the values of the court.

Physicality and sensuality also dominate the world of Hotspur and Kate as depicted by Welles. The first image we have of Hotspur in his home again evokes warmth - Hotspur sits in his bathtub with steam rising around him. Although it is tempting to dismiss the scene that follows as Hotspur's misogynist and sexist tirade against a patriarchally victimized Kate, Welles instead chooses to emphasize the love play between Kate and Hotspur. Jorgens's characterization of Hotspur as "barely likeable" (115) stems from his misinterpretation that Welles intends us to perceive Hotspur as an adult. Like Hal, Hotspur is a child who embarks on a great enterprise. One child will grow to manhood, and the other will meet with an early death. Viewed as a child, Hotspur becomes quite likeable, and his actions become quite understandable. When Bolingbroke abruptly dismisses him he is first surprised, then meekly nods submission and leaves the room fuming. Once out of the room and the hearing of the "adults" he throws a tantrum in the company of Northumberland and Worcester. In this scene, Worcester, like Bolingbroke, is photographed from below, framed by stone walls and a ray of light, and emits a frosty breath. Worcester proceeds to manipulate Hotspur out of his tantrum and into the plot to overthrow Bolingbroke. As a child, Hotspur is entirely at the mercy of adults.

Hotspur certainly looks child-like as he sits in his bathtub, reading aloud "The purpose you undertake is dangerous" with a vague and uncomprehending expression on his face. Through clever editing, Welles punctuates Hotspur's bombast with blasts from trumpets to the effect that we cannot even begin to take Hotspur seriously. As Kate wraps her arms around his shoulders

his face becomes unsure and troubled. He is the little boy who loves to play at war games and pretends not to like girls. For all his brevity, Kate manages to dominate him simply by twisting his baby finger. On the eve of the battle of Shrewsbury Hotspur is a naive child full of wonder and excitement - qualities that render a child very appealing - but which render this man extremely vulnerable to the manipulations of Worcester. Through this naivety, Hotspur, and England, are robbed of their youth. Samuel Crowl writes:

Shakespeare presents multiple perspectives on Shrewsbury's significance: Worcester's cold Machiavellianism, Henry IV's shrewd military strategy, Hotspur's heady intemperance, Douglas's exasperated professionalism, Falstaff's knowing cynicism, and Hal's practical assurance that this is his day to seize. Abandoning Shakespeare's multiplicity, Welles concentrated on a modern extension of Falstaff's understanding that war's appetite is fed by 'mortal men', that war can make all of us 'food for powder'. Welles attempts to capture what war is like for the men in the trenches rather than for those mounted on dashing chargers gliding athletically toward their opponents ... Welles's treatment of Shrewsbury ... is a slow, painful, exhausting depiction of mud-laden soldiers enacting some primal destructive rite. (46)

Welles's depiction of Shrewsbury certainly ranks as one of his most remarkable cinematic achievements. It also represents the structural and emotional centre of this film. In contextualizing the battle sequence within the film, Jorgens writes:

... *Chimes at Midnight* has a two-part structure, the two halves being divided by the battle of Shrewsbury. Before the battle, life for Hal is an idyll of jests, robberies where the money is given back, impromptu plays, late-night revels, and sporting with girls among tuns of wine. Rash young Hotspur, ranting against the King at court or against a cowardly rebel in bathtub, is attractive because of his energy and spontaneity, and Falstaff is likeable because of his affection for Hal, his wit, and his love of play. As the battle approaches, however, the seamier sides of Falstaff, Hotspur, and Hal come out. Falstaff, driven from his festive inn, becomes ugly as he victimizes the poor and leaves Doll to the unwanted embraces of Mistress Quickly's customers. Hotspur is both gullible - easily taken in by his crafty uncle Worcester - and suicidal, as he eagerly seeks battle despite the odds. Hal becomes increasingly aligned with his cunning, imperious father. After the battle, England becomes a land of sterility, disease, and death - Hotspur is dead, Falstaff's staff has fallen and like

the King he is dying, diseased Doll is ironically pregnant, weary, melancholy Hal and bitter, cynical Poins sit by a still pond. By the end, Falstaff and the King are dead, Falstaff's seedy followers are imprisoned, and charming, Dickensian Shallow has become a greedy scavenger who wants his thousand pounds. Hal has risen to his duty and become Henry V, meeting the national need for order, health, and a direction but at a cost. As a king he must betray his friends, join a hypocritical moralistic revulsion against humor, freedom, and improvisation, and, glorious adventure or not, follow Henry IV's advice to 'busy giddy minds with foreign wars' (112-113).

The battle sequence represents the second, and the major intrusion of the perspective of those marginalized by history into the film. Previous to the battle sequence, Welles has already decided to show Falstaff's conscripts to us. Although the narrative structure of the film is concerned chiefly with the personal histories of some ten people, it is only Falstaff and his entourage that we see throughout the course of the battle sequence. Although this battle sequence forms the structural and emotional centre of the film, the four characters in the diegesis of the film that have the most to win or lose depending on its outcome are nowhere to be seen. What we do see, amid graphic depictions of the fates of the anonymous soldiers in this battle, are brief and repeated shots of Falstaff, Bardolph, Pistol, Nym, and the page scurrying to avoid danger.

Welles begins his battle sequence as all standard "Prince Valiant" fare should, with shots of two armies of men on horseback rapidly approaching one another as shouts of "God speed" and "St. George defend us" are heard. The music that accompanied the opening credits is played as the two armies initially assault one another and fight on horseback with swords. The music assumes a more sinister aspect as people are bludgeoned with maces and clubs, impaled upon spears, stuck with arrows, and battered with bare hands, finally falling exhausted into the mud while still wrestling with one another. Infinitely superior to Branagh's Agincourt, Welles's Shrewsbury depicts not only the weariness and dirtiness of war, it also depicts the brutality and nastiness of war.

In the aftermath of Shrewsbury, Bolingbroke's illness is first introduced to us as he suffers a fainting spell while mounting his horse. After this, we are again presented with a voice-over narration from Holinshed coupled with images of the traitors from Shrewsbury being hanged. This narration confirms Bolingbroke's illness to us. In one of the film's most remarkable scenes, Geilgud, shot in profile with a shadow falling over his face and completely obscuring his eyes, deliv-

ers the soliloquy ending "uneasy lies the head that wears a crown". The composition is strange and uncomfortable to watch, for, as we become aware of Bolingbroke's inner torment, it seems that, in his repression of all of the possibilities for warmth and affection in his polity, he has erased a crucial portion of his own identity. We can see the anguish in his mouth and forehead, but we cannot see his eyes. It seems the effort that this man has expended throughout his life has ultimately killed something in him that would have made his life meaningful.

Another remarkably moving scene that is presented to us depicts Hal and Poins sneaking into the ceiling rafters at the Boar's Head and, by carefully moving the ceiling slats aside, observing an intimate moment between Falstaff and Doll. The tavern is still the place of human warmth and affection, but, as life in England has now been purged of vitality by the battle of Shrewsbury, the need to form bonds and alliances seems to be born more out of despair than of joy. Falstaff lies on his back and Doll climbs on top of him, caressing and kissing him. Although charged with eroticism this scene is also tender and affectionate. Falstaff repeats the phrase "I am old" while Doll tries to reassure him of her affection. Hal and Poins reveal themselves, and again lie with Falstaff and Doll in the bed. Poins and Falstaff engage in a snide repartee, while Doll rests her head on Hal's chest and closes her eyes. Hal cradles Doll in his arms and comforts her as Poins and Falstaff snipe at one another. It is one of the film's most subtle and beautiful moments. As the world of the tavern becomes increasingly marginalized, the pattern of joviality and jest within tavern life now contains the need for reassurance and affection.

It is now that the season of decay and death has firmly been established by Welles that he presents us with the reprisal of the prologue scene. This second representation of the scene is realistic in nature as opposed to the idealized nature of the prologue version. Three men, Falstaff, Shallow, and Silence, as opposed to two in the original version, now sit in front of the fireplace. The vision of the giddy and enthusiastic Shallow is now replaced by that of an inane and irritating old man who prattles on about insignificant matters to Falstaff's obvious annoyance. Shallow has developed a truly irritating habit of poking and clawing at Falstaff, and playing with Falstaff's hat. Although the scene is comic in its execution, Welles is also making us aware that of the two possibilities for life represented in the prologue and credits sequences, that of repression and victimization had become the predominant possibility throughout the course of the film.

The tragedy of Falstaff, as depicted by Welles, is that of a man who fails to understand how his own life

is governed by social and historical factors that surround him yet are beyond his control. Samuel Crowl argues that the ultimate rejection of Falstaff is foreshadowed several times in the film (41). Hal's famous "I know you all" soliloquy is delivered to Falstaff with a wink as if Falstaff was in on the gag, and Hal makes it plain that he has every intention of banishing Falstaff at the end of the "play extempore". Falstaff stubbornly refuses to accept the evidence of his eyes and ears. Even after the famous rejection scene he says to Shallow, "He must seem thus to the world, I shall be sent for in private to him". Our final image of Falstaff presents him in the background of a deep space composition, appearing to be almost swallowed up by darkness. His final statement in the film is "I shall be sent for soon." This statement now contains a double meaning - it expresses Falstaff's hope that he will be reconciled with Hal, yet contains Falstaff's knowledge that he will never see Hal again, and that there is nothing left for him to do but await his death.

As Falstaff's huge coffin is wheeled out of the courtyard by Bardolph, Pistol, Nym, and Poins we hear the final imposition of Richardson's narration on to the action of the film. Holinshed speaks glowingly of Hal - "... humane withal, he left no offense unpunished, nor friendship unrewarded. For conclusion, a majesty was he that both lived and died a pattern in princehood, a lodestar in honour, and famous to the world always." Previously, the interpolations of Richardson's narrations onto the soundtrack were coupled with images of the hanging of traitors. Falstaff's death is now linked to the pattern of brutality and repression that those marginalized and victimized by the struggle to consolidate and maintain personal and political power experience. Falstaff's heart has been killed, but so has Bolingbroke's, as the result of their existence within a regime that marginalizes human values and needs and prioritizes political gain. Ultimately, everyone in this social order is victimized in some way. (Welles makes no effort to conceal the fact that Hal is also deeply hurt by having to banish Falstaff). The possibility of an idyllic England as represented by the film's prologue is completely negated.

While recently viewing *Citizen Kane* I became aware of and highly disturbed by two factors in the film. Firstly, the film functions in many ways as a self-reflexive meditation on its own inadequacy in dealing with its subject matter. Secondly, although we do find the identity of Rosebud, we have no larger understanding of those factors which made Kane a failure in life, and therefore are left with the feeling that the film really hasn't explained anything. (Indeed, this sentiment is voiced at the film's conclusion by the reporter that has been investigating

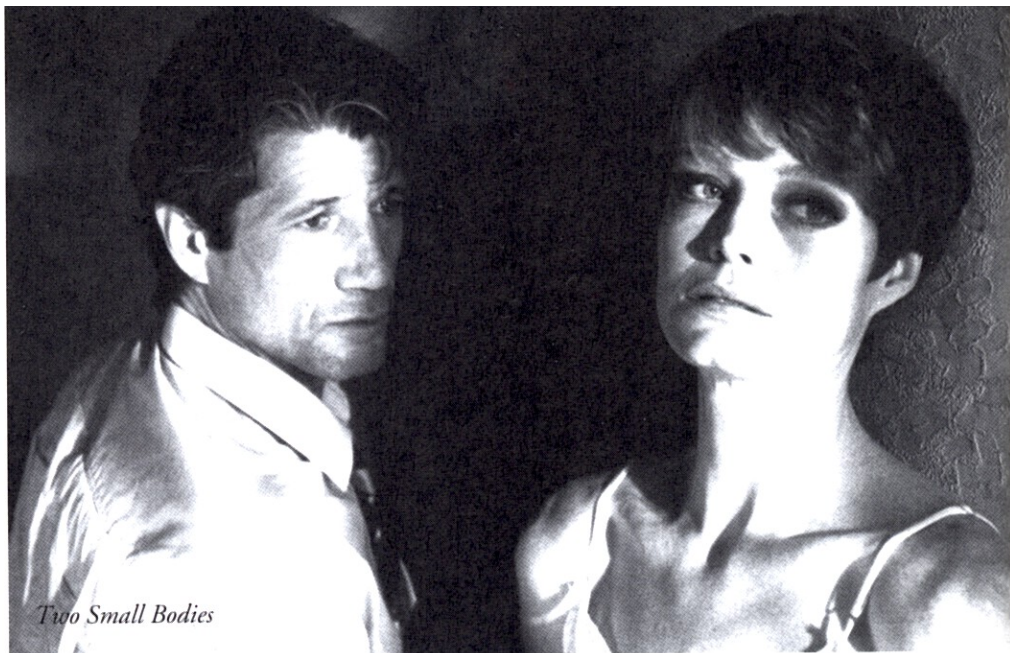
Kane's life.) In his first film, Welles tends to place responsibility for Kane's failure on Kane's own behaviour, and makes little attempt to depict how Kane's life is intertwined with historical and social factors that might share this responsibility. By incorporating the voice-over narrations from Holinshed and a perspective on historical events as seen by those who are marginalized by them into the structure of his last film, Welles transcends his first film. *Citizen Kane* is a film made by the young Orson Welles, and is full of a young film-maker's energy and self-conscious brilliance. *Chimes at Midnight* is a film made by a greatly matured Orson Welles, and is a film tempered with an older film-maker's wisdom and willingness to place his brilliance in the services of the story he wishes to relate. *Chimes at Midnight* is a moving and a beautiful film, and tells a story of how two people who love one another are ultimately driven apart by historical forces which are beyond their control. In many ways, *Chimes at Midnight* is a far greater film than *Citizen Kane*, and deserves to be accorded an appropriate position within the Welles canon. Although in many ways it is Welles's simplest film, it is from this simplicity that *Chimes at Midnight* ultimately draws its strength.

Works Cited

- Chimes at Midnight*. Dir. Orson Welles. Internacional Films Espanola, 1967.
Citizen Kane. Dir. Orson Welles. RKO, 1941.
 Crowl, Samuel. *Shakespeare Observed: Studies in Performance on Stage and Screen*. Athens, OH.: Ohio University Press, 1992.
 Davies, Anthony. *Filming Shakespeare's Plays: The Adaptations of Laurence Olivier, Orson Welles, Peter Brook, and Akira Kurosawa*. Cambridge, MA.: University of Cambridge Press, 1988.
Henry V. Dir. Kenneth Branagh. Renaissance Films, 1989.
Henry V. Dir. Laurence Olivier. Rank, 1945.
 Jorgens, Jack J. *Shakespeare on Film*. Bloomington, IN.: Indiana University Press, 1977.
King Lear. Dir. Peter Brook. Filmways, 1970.
 Pilkington, Ace G. *Screening Shakespeare: From Richard II to Henry V*. London: Associated University Presses, 1991.

... two
characters...
like tightly
wound pieces
of twine,
slowly begin
to unravel,
twisting and
gyrating in a
syncopated
symphony
of guilt,
rage,
loneliness,
and betrayal.

Beth B. re:
Two Small Bodies



New Parents and Old:

The Horrifying Lyricism of Dancing on Graves



The Smell of Burning Ants

by Diane Sippl

In a film about a man who murdered his mother in his youth, the camera rests upon his fellow inmate advising the man with great zest, "You have to make something explode to truly understand it. You have to examine the tiny particles while they're still on fire." What follows here is an attempt to catch those particles — white heat flying in the face of darkness, flames of memory that ward off the night — to explore the ways that lyricism in the cinema, however painful its emotions, can expose the power of the past in the present. Three fairly short films will be discussed here: George Hickenlooper's 25-minute social drama, *Some Folks Call It a Sling Blade*; Jay Rosenblatt's 21-minute poetic essay, *The Smell of Burning Ants*; and Beth B.'s 80-minute adaptation of a two-character play, *Two Small Bodies*. What brings these strangely out-of-genre films together is not so much the doggedly singular visions of their authors but the off-kilter manner of their expressions. The filmmakers respond to the ways parents have socialized children and institutions have socialized parents, but the school, church, prison, asylum, and mass media are only the backdrop, sometimes offscreen, against which each film stages a taught lamentation of death and loss — of the perpetrators, not the victims.

These media artists draw from direct experience with people “on the edge,” George Hickenlooper having worked in an asylum for the criminally insane, Jay Rosenblatt having served as a therapist in a mental health center for long-term patients, and Beth B. having experienced her own mother’s nervous breakdown and departure from her home. As filmmakers, each of these independents has won international acclaim for films that mix documentary and fiction, the personal and the social, horror and lyricism.¹ For example, Hickenlooper’s black and white fiction film reads like an experimental documentary by Frederick Wiseman. Its mode of enunciation stretching between investigative journalism and lyrical performance, *Some Folks Call It a Sling Blade* evokes the camera techniques and social commitment of the 1960’s Direct Cinema movement. In many ways, the lyricism in *Sling Blade* is as disconcerting and provocative as it was in Wiseman’s *Titticut Follies*.

George Hickenlooper’s *Some Folks Call it a Sling Blade*



Some Folks Call It a Sling Blade

Well, it’s nothing new for the Giants. They once again will be asked to do what they’ve had to do for much of the season, and that is play “catch-up.” Well they went through this Friday night — they were down 4. So when you get to this point you certainly don’t want to dig too big a hole for yourself...

Soundtrack over the credits for *Some Folks Call It a Sling Blade*

A thirteen-year-old boy commits a double murder, is convicted, declared insane, and sent to a prison asylum where he spends the next twenty-five years. At middle age, he is released into a society he has never known as a man. Our encounter with him is through his “story” that he agrees to share with a female journalist. From this monologue we learn that Karl was severely traumatized throughout his boyhood, by both of his parents, his classmates, and a local seducer. The one “kindness” he mentions is routine Bible lessons from his mother. One day Karl found her nude on the floor with the seducer; to protect his mother he killed the man, but upon discovering her grief, Karl killed her, too. The effect of this narrative in the cinema hinges entirely upon the way that it is presented — not only on the strategies used to frame it as a story-within-a-story, but on the delivery of the tale itself and the *deliverance* it brings to its teller.

Karl's static, opaque face and nearly monotone, metered statements cause our attention to shift to the quality of his voice, deep and sober; to his candid and deliberate tone, and to his drawl verging on an unconscious growl; to the Southernisms of his diction, his slow tempo and see-saw rhythm. We sense the call-response pattern in his phrasing, evocative of a prayer-meeting or community gathering. "Jesse Dickson, even more cruel than his ol' man, made quite a bit o' sport o' me, took advantage o' the young girls in the neighborhood. Jesse Dickson had his way with my mom..." So Karl hit him with a Kaiser blade — "some folks call it a sling blade" — and then did the same to his mother. Asked if he'd do it again, he "reckons" he would. Karl clasps and wrings his hands as he speaks, his stoop-shouldered, barrel-chested body motionless except for a scooping movement of the neck as if to get his head comfortable from time to time. His eyes peer sadly at the reporter who stands across the empty room, dark except for a standing lamp that reveals the prisoner.

We are so entranced in the telling of the tale that we never notice the slow tracking movement of the camera: it commences the narrative with a long shot of Karl and several minutes later arrives at a medium shot, during which time we have assumed its gaze as we are ever-so-carefully drawn into the world Karl creates. Perhaps "caringly" is the better word, since paradoxically, by the time we hear the lurid details, we are less afraid of and more in-tune with Karl's interior. The interviewer walks directly past Karl to leave when she is finished. "Thank you," he says. She turns back and offers a handshake. Too timid to reciprocate, he looks down and declines, turning his face away.

By this time in the film our point of view as spectators has already reframed him in his own world. We have come to read the past in terms of the present because it is no longer the "facts" that matter, nor the pronouncement of innocence or guilt, but Karl's "song" — his own reconstruction, a personal memory. It strikes us as his singular expression within a history that relied on an oral tradition spoken by storytellers. Karl is at once enlarged and encased by the specifics of his memory and the narrow parameters of his being. He is confined by his legacy and he knows it, and in some ways the lyricism of the song he has composed and sings is contingent upon his encasement. As Karl discloses his unremitting and unaided life with his past, the texture of his twitches and sighs works a strange alchemy on our sense of him as a person. Karl's particular tale is a leap in the dark, not only his own but ours, a journey out of the blackest hole, of pain and introjected ugliness. We grow in our relation to this man on the screen: "the lamp alight is the combination of internal and external, glowing at the imagination as one."²

Outside of the lyrical performance in and of itself, *Some Folks Call It a Sling Blade* re-frames public history by presenting three other characters with a discretely subjective camera style. The presumptuousness of the novice journalist makes us uneasy as we follow her course of action. Her oblivious intrusiveness in commanding the interview and in breaking the bizarre rules exacted upon her leads us to believe that, owing not to the prisoner's harmful potential but to her own media-arrogant behavior, she *may* end up terrorized or hurt. Yet it is Karl who compels the subjective camera, and she who distances it, as the film progresses, diminishing the institutional gaze of the media and prioritizing the singular, unified impression Karl exchanges with the spectator.

The warden's role is to formulate neurotic demands in behalf of the prisoner ("No fluorescent lights; no photographs; no questions allowed") rather than to demonstrate any level of institutional care or concern that has ever been extended to Karl. Where will he go? "Wherever he wants to." Will he at least be supervised? "As much as anyone else is." We have no way of believing that Karl has ever been offered or provided a diagnosis, medication, or therapy, and yet every bit as much as he has been interned in an asylum, he is expected to make the adjustment to a livable life outside.

The first voice of the film is that of Karl's fellow inmate, who makes a routine of stroking the hair on the arm of a more unconscious and vulnerable inmate. This behavior figures the sexual attitudes he relates in his lurid tales of lust, murder, and trysts with prostitutes. "Isn't it funny," he asks Karl, referring to the vagina but symbolically to the womb, "that we spend

¹My acquaintance with each of these films owes much to the International Festival of Film, Locarno, where *Two Small Bodies* had its world premiere in 1993 and where *Some Folks Call It a Sling Blade* and *The Smell of Burning Ants* were selected by Michael Beltrami and his committee for competition in the 1994 Leopards of Tomorrow short film section. The films have gone on to win top awards at numerous international festivals. *Two Small Bodies* and *Some Folks Call It a Sling Blade* are now in commercial distribution in home video format, and *The Smell of Burning Ants* may be requested through Locomotion Films, 4159 20th St., San Francisco, CA 94114. Rosenblatt has made other experimental films including *Short of Breath* and teaches film production at San Francisco State University. Beth B. emerged as a pioneer of New York's punk cinema and has made numerous noir-style videos; *Two Small Bodies* was commissioned for German television by ZDF's Arte channel and is an adaptation of a play by Neal Bell. Hickenlooper has made the documentaries *Hearts of Darkness* (regarding Francis Ford Coppola) and *Picture This* (regarding Peter Bogdanovich) as well as theatrical films, most recently *The Low Life*, recently released theatrically. *Some Folks Call It a Sling Blade* was written in conjunction with Billy Bob Thornton, its lead actor, who wrote his own monologue and acted it upon the stage for a number of years, and who also wrote and acted in the feature film, *One False Move*.

²Eudora Welty, *The Eye of the Story*, Vintage Books, New York, 1990, p. 120.

all of our death trying to get out of that little hole, and all of our life trying to get back in it?" For the longest time we think he is the man the film will be about, the one the journalist has come to visit. During the entire first sequence it is he who motivates the camera around the room through a series of safety windows with a voyeuristic gaze, that of the photo-journalist-turned-spectator. The lens settles upon him as the storyteller, facing us, as Karl's foregrounded profile reveals hardly a smirk, but an occasional animal-like grunt. Karl is the listener, positioning us as such, and with good reason: we begin to witness Karl's view of the prison — a relatively safe place where he has a real bed and gets food, companionship and his own books. In Karl's point of view the prison is a reprieve from torment and humiliation, a nourishing shelter: he has spent all of his boyhood in the "death" of trying to get out of that "dark hole," the womb, only to be born into another dark hole dug in the ground in a woodshed that his parents designated as his "home," punishment by God for their sex that in turn punished them with such an ugly child. Indeed, Karl has *not* spent all of his life trying to get back into either the vagina *or* the "solace" of the womb, but upon his leave from the asylum he will enter yet another dark hole: a world that he has no idea how ill-prepared he is to inhabit.

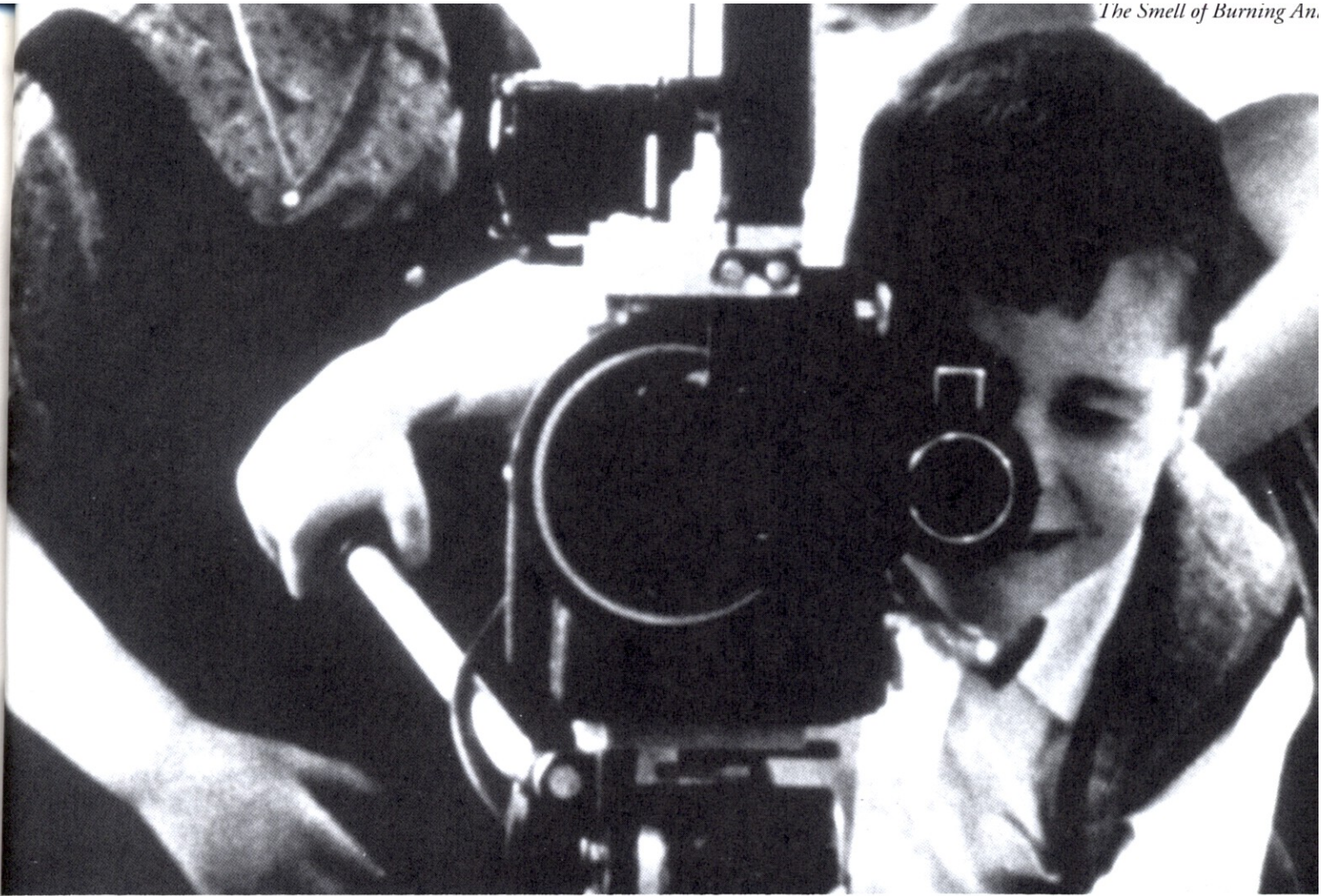
Karl may well be walking out the prison door to death, not life, and the film renders his memory fragile vis-à-vis the prospects for his future. Karl's feelings, from which he has constructed his memory, are all he has, but beside the behaviors of those who populate the on- and off-screen worlds of the film — his fellow inmates, the warden, the journalist, and also his parents and childhood peers — this man's longing resonates with validity and value, at least to us. Through his lyrical soliloquy of a memory perishable but carrying with it the seeds of change, we begin to reconsider who committed the real "murder"; we ponder the emptiness of the facts that proclaimed that truth of his crime. Hickenlooper has transformed the question of whether Karl will harm others to the question of what harm we will bring to him.

The imagination is stone-deaf to argument; lyrical films are only maps. And they are not about who we are, or what we know to be true, but about hopes and longings. The lyrical moment is "a wish to be, to become, to understand," to find a place, though each of us takes that place to a different heart.³ Still, real life is not wished but lived. Experience brings vulnerability to imperfections, subjection to atrocities. We struggle against crisis and decay, against time.

³Frances Sherwood, *Vindication*, Penguin Books, New York, 1993, p. 55.



The Smell of Burning Ants



The Smell of Burning Ants

If... photographs and moving images are not mirrors with memories, if they are more... like a hall of mirrors, then our own best response to this crisis of representation might be to... deploy the many facets of these mirrors to reveal the seduction of lies.

Linda Williams, "Mirrors without Memories..."

Without the act of human understanding — and it is a double act through which we make sense to each other — experience is the worst kind of emptiness; it is obliteration, black or prismatic, as meaningless as was indeed that loveless cave. Before there is meaning there has to occur some personal act of vision. And it is this that is continuously projected... as we, each to ourselves, read.

Eudora Welty, *The Eye of the Story*



The lyrical films discussed here, in their depth and in their reach, generate a prismatic light that allows us to face our feelings, to be initiated into our own new experience. Jay Rosenblatt's inventive presentation of painful childhood images in *The Smell of Burning Ants* dramatizes the effects on the present of upholding the lies of the past. By selecting numerous segments of found footage representing boyhood in the 1950's and manipulating each frame of it so as to "hypothesize" it, to complicate it with a question, he composes a personal expression of mourning, lamenting the process by which boys have become men. Rather than presuming to deconstruct the Truth about gender socialization by power and authority, the alibis of patriarchal indoctrination, he succeeds in showing, as Linda Williams claims of some new documentaries, "how lies function as partial truths to both agents and witnesses" of history's traumas.⁴

Rosenblatt's committed curiosity about his own past and his ingenuity in reactivating it allow him to discover how he himself was seduced by the relative truths of masculinity. But instead of simply juxtaposing fragments of found footage — tortured insects, a boy's toilet training, wrestling adolescents, the rape of a woman — he keenly structures repetition in his film, pushing the strategy from the lyrical refrain, the return to motifs and themes, to the haunting, perverse lyricism of obsessive repetition, creating relentless chords painful in their dissonance with real time. Each singular entrance of the multiple conspiratorial truths he presents is, as seems inherent in Rosenblatt's personal style of memory, "repeated" (not technically, but illusionistically) as he slows down time with his optical printer, re-shooting and sometimes step-framing others' footage to produce the effect of slow motion or freeze-frames that make the film his own. But these "repetitions" are really myriad singular distortions, literally reframing the context of the original footage by cropping for a closer view, a grainier and therefore distanced effect but also a look at more detail, or sometimes simply by slowing the footage down as the camera shoots it, multiplying rather than adding images.

With a soundtrack that counterposes children's colloquialisms with the voice-over or image of an adult man, the film layers fragments of the past upon the present, often frustrating the spectator in doing so. "One one thousand, two one thousand... ten one thousand, ready or not, here I come!" the man's voice speaks soberly over frames of what is not a children's game (or *is* it?) of a man's humiliation by an authority before his peers. It is the first human action in the film, and we would like to settle our routine questions of "Who, What, When, Where, Why," but there are no answers. "The film is about a man. He is angry. He is not entirely sure why..." is all we are told, and we must find our own focus from the blur, as does the boy with the movie camera, the visual correlative in the film for our psychological processing of the aural-visual experience.

Pruning and shaping footage of boys shoving, beating on, and tormenting each other and all smaller creatures while they themselves find coming of age a torture, Rosenblatt generally relies upon fades in his film, to and from black, rather than dissolves or cuts, suggesting the slipping in and out of consciousness, the imminence of death.

The themes the director registers in his emotional essay evoke earlier theatrical films that address the subjective agonies of coercion — the shame of being dragged through town with one's head shaved in *Hiroshima, Mon Amour*, or the festering guilt of collaborators in *The Sorrow and the Pity*.

There are, however, two momentary outlets from loss and grief in *The Smell of Burning Ants*. One comes with an individual boy, posed ambivalently as both someone who retaliates by perpetuating pain and/or someone who savors life by exploring its potential. The man's voice follows him from shot to shot:

He is not a bully. He is not a victim. There he is. At the end of the line. He learns to fake interest. This will lead others to believe that he belongs. There he is again. A collaborator. He tries to keep secret the betrayal he commits. Later he will be with women and feel what he has been robbed of.

The boy's camera is a device the director uses to open up a new mental segment of his life, one that carries him beyond Father and friends, competition and sadism. When a previous frame freezes on a bullying child with his fist held up defiantly at *us*, the cut is to the boy with the camera, who confronts not only the previous boy but once again *us*, his camera aimed directly at the spectator. The camera is a weapon but also a way for the boy to detach and distance himself from the hegemonic codes of his socialization. Finally, it is a way for the director to claim his role in the film — his complicity but also his challenge as a memory-maker. With the boy's camera, we also will be recorded. What are our present limits and opportunities in constructing our personal memories?

The second departure from the film's portrayal of the social organization of self-destruction is an "ode to joy." The most lyrical episode in an entirely lyrical work, it is introduced with a close-up of a hand cutting straight through a strip of film. What follows is a balletic celebration of boyhood commemorating the simple joys of exploring time and space in the cinema experiments of a hundred years ago.

Establishing the *adagio* tempo and graceful rhythm of this poignant sequence is a man's plaintive off-screen voice singing "Un furtiva lagrima" ("A Furtive Tear") from Donizetti's opera, *L'elisir d'amore* (*The Elixir of Love*). A ball bouncing on a wall initiates a series of duets-in-time, harmonies in play as younger boys follow older boys with smaller-scale props. Rolling, swinging, crawling, climbing, sliding, they move through their world, small boys miming big boys possessed of inner power and force, models who inspire without the defense of hollow hierarchies. A ludic imagination transforms anything into a toy, and the boys appropri-

ate found objects for their play — a wheel rim follows a rolling tire; a fence-top is a high-beam awaiting four feet. Invading the spaces of codes and rules, riding the edges of feeling and form, the repeated rituals of play delay the momentum of death. A stone surface invites chalk; the joint insignia of two boys inscribing a wall pronounces the filmmaker's reinscription of his own past by photo-etching on plastic in a joint contract with the spectator. The man's song is culminated by the unleashing of joy as more children bound out the door to play, including a girl, on whom the frame freezes.

Through the inflection and phrasing of his own "speech," the audio-visual orchestration of his own "voice," the filmmaker explores both his and our emotional resources. Eliciting our furtive tears for all that we have robbed ourselves of in the process of "burning ants,"⁵ the sequence also shows us, in the choreography of an alternative approach to filmmaking, how to "dance on graves." Rosenblatt's film, while naming no particular dramatic character, creates a subjective discourse about a collective history; it refuses to become that history, but by virtue of the making of a personal memory, *conjures* it. Footage that in other contexts might produce nostalgia for an earlier, "innocent" time here closes the door for such a mode of entry but ushers in mourning for loss — the loss not of identification with that regime but of our joy when its fire drove us to poison ourselves with our own venom. A painful film, *The Smell of Burning Ants* "re-opens our wounds to let the poison out."⁶

Two Small Bodies

A relationship of the most fleeting kind has the power inherent to loom like a genie — to become vocative at the last, as it has already become present and taken up room; as it has spread out as a destination however unlikely; as it has glimmered and rushed by in the dark... showing occasional points of fire.

Eudora Welty, *The Eye of the Story*

⁴Linda Williams, "Mirrors without Memories: Truth, History, and the New Documentary," *Film Quarterly*, Vol. 46 No. 3, Spring 1993, p. 17.

⁵In a telephone interview (August, 1994), Jay Rosenblatt told this author, "There are books comparing ants to humans. On some level I always looked up to ants (though I also burned them) because of their cooperation — the group was emphasized over the individual. But certain groups of ants corral and feed off of aphids as slaves, though they are slaves to their own queen. They feed off of aphids and milk them, consuming their nectar. Ants are a metaphor for how we can try to destroy a whole culture, or a whole people, a whole human race."

⁶*Ibid.*

My intent was to transform a cruel and tender song of solitude and despair into a rediscovery of life and compassion.

Beth B., regarding *Two Small Bodies*

Eileen Maloney's two small children have disappeared, and she is suspected of killing them. Separated from her husband, she works as a hostess in a nightclub with exotic dancers. Police officer Lieutenant Brann intrudes at her home to question her, and it's as if he never leaves. Technically the film is structured by a variety of his entrances and exits, but each serves only to foreshadow his inevitable return. The situation is a sober one not only because death is imminent, and with it a murder charge, but also because of the compulsive masculine power that descends upon Eileen, in the guise of the law, and equally in the man behind it. Yet from the outset these two characters, who comprise the entire cast of the film, twist and turn their somber pursuit — testimony regarding a possible crime — into a game of seduction. As time progresses, the nature of the crime changes, from kidnapping, to abuse of minors, to murder of children and then to the terrorizing of a woman by a man. But what also changes continually is the ironic relation between the lyrical style of the characters' behavior and the form of the social conventions that inscribe them, and this slippery relation adds another layer of tension to the film.

In this short feature that borrows directly from the *film noir* genre, the resolution of the quest for Truth in the narrative would seem to rest on tangible evidence, but the dramatic trajectory of *Two Small Bodies* slips in a different direction, toward an exposure that begins with an intuition. We view the characters as they view themselves, through an emotive lens, a feeling that comes to fruition in showing the heart that has expected, all the while that it dreads, this exposure.

There are a number of ambiguities in the film. What we assume is an official investigation soon enough becomes a violent physical confrontation. Brann's contempt increasingly reveals itself as a thin veneer over his desire; however, while the officer and the mother possess each other sexually, there is no sexual activity in the film. The camera invites another level of ambiguity, its distance from the characters allowing us to select the details upon which we focus. Sustaining medium-length shots throughout most of *Two Small Bodies*, Beth B. creates in the camera a third character, a conscience without answers. We align ourselves with the camera as we look and listen, enlarging and diminishing the man and woman, assisting them or betraying them, judging and interpreting them. But our knowledge is tentative and contemplative, seeking

values rather than truths. It is what we construct in the blind spots of the drama — the mysteries of the off-screen violence that always amount to more than the harm perpetrated upon two small bodies. Our relative knowledge is comprised of Brann's and Eileen's shifting fears of both pain and pleasure as the two of them bob and weave in domination and humiliation. Doorways, windows, a tabletop, an outdoor swing all become thresholds of horror. The push and pull of the couple's dynamic mating ritual, a duel of torture, ultimately becomes a death dance performed on the graves of children, celebrating their metamorphosis into two adults small in scale beside the possibilities of love and trust, the vastness of secret lives that might be revealed in their entirety.

Brann betrays an incredible sense of irony alongside of his despair and vulnerability; it discloses the desperation of his audacity. After all, he not only represents the Law, including the family morality installed in our homes via the mass media; he also embodies its enforcement. But like the media, he turns to seduction and manipulation to manage this. Do his tactics for Eileen transfer to us? If so, then this is where we find the lure of the lyrical: his and Eileen's emotional sparing, at times horrifying to us, affords them parity and honesty, the intimacy that allows for one-to-one communication. In confronting each other's rage and guilt, their violation and retribution can be recognized as feelings of betrayal and loss. Loneliness can take on the dimensions of compassion.

But it is something wilder than ordinary communication that is exchanged between Brann and Eileen, something more ruthless and tender, more pressing and acute. Through most of the film they do not desire each other; they merely desire to be seductive. Their shared ritual takes the form of an on-going postmodern ballad: the form remains intact, the verses fluctuating and the choruses repeating as they have throughout folk history, but the content rotates between Brann's myths and Eileen's exaggerations of them. Brann is a caricature of a brutal, macho cop without knowing it. His swagger reads as an unconscious put-on. Eileen illustrates his misogynist mind, posing as a bad mother, a nymphomaniac, Woman, an inferior being.

From the beginning he projects onto her the "story" of "her" crime, soliciting her recollection of killing her children, fabricating it and terrorizing her with it so as to force a confession from her; at the same time her parodies of his projections become increasingly intense, outrageous and obsessive. The stanzas of the ballad and its refrains are, then, his lies and her heightened, parodic enactments of them — not unlike lurid tabloid photos highlighted by captions and headlines whose pleasure in devouring is the ironic ritual of pas-

tiche upstaging Truth. The problem is that the Lieutenant Brann, decked out in trench coat, Fedora, shoulder strap and guns, does not own his compulsive behavior. It owns him, so long as he subscribes to the history and language that authorize him. Neither his fake narrative nor Eileen's perverse echoes of it are memories, stories, affording the reciprocity of an auratic relation. For them to share a dance is not possible until the balance of power shifts so radically that one of them is not so much "bigger" than the other — until she cuts him down to the size he sees her as being. One reason he has made her this size is that he can't see the size *he* is, because he believes his own myth. But Eileen doesn't; she responds to the threat of his meaning rather than to his hollow form. She has something to fear: his power. Therefore the meaning she embodies is more than the game he bargained for, the stamina of her resistance more than his strength, and she finally manages to confront him with the option of "shrinking" into a human container. He doesn't know it, but this is why he keeps coming back — back to the scene of the crime, the crime of his reign of terror; he comes back to really *listen* to her.

An example of the odd mirror effects achieved through the inversion of parameters in the film is the reversal of the power relation as the game changes its direction. The "scene of the crime" shifts from the children's room where they were kidnapped, to the "site behind closed doors" where the foul play of sexual seduction transpires, to the place in which two new "children" of an emerging relation create a space to share. The new space is literally the space occupied by the two "small" adult bodies in their dance, figuratively the space of the reverberations of memory between Brann and Eileen; but it is set in the very same room, the "children's room," by now transformed into the graveyard of the "crime" — the patriarchal imbalance of power.

Time hovers over Eileen — but also Brann — as first events, and then emotions, and then relationships come forth in their significance. Repetition itself becomes a metaphor for living in time. If the camera gives us an imaginary third character who thinks and judges, it is time that plays the subjective role in this character, pulsing, breathing, feeling. Time sees and hears and bears the heavy weight of memory. In imaginary time, as in life, the heart believes before the mind remembers. And when remembering demands the strength of a survival instinct, it may command the power of an art. The rage seeping through the surface of *Two Small Bodies* seems relentless; yet *in time* Brann's quiet metamorphosis awakens another, earlier one, which has come to rest in the past that Eileen had left behind, a past that long ago pronounced to her what constitutes her own danger and salvation.

The "two small bodies," then, come to be no longer the children as victims — Annie and Johnnie now strangled and dead — who used to dance in their free play, but the self-handcuffed adults, disempowered spectres in a *pas de deux* dirge that commences the death of a hierarchical regime and at the same time animates two partners in a sensual exchange of emotion.

The key tension in *Two Small Bodies* lies between the identificatory gaze of old gender roles and the auratic gaze of lovers.⁷ The lyricism of the dance is nothing without two shared subjectivities. The dance itself and both the visual flashbacks (to the children's room, the "scene of the crime") and verbal flashbacks (private domestic anecdotes) serve as repetitions that announce and detain death by fueling Brann's growing need for intimacy with Eileen. Note the irony in the final utterance of the words "I came to listen to you":

EILEEN I can imagine a man, a normal, average man... who's always been normal and average... until he sees your two boys... and he becomes obsessed... and he waits outside the playground and your boys come out and he tells them to get in his car.

BRANN I've told them never to get in strangers' cars.

EILEEN He'll be dressed as a policeman. A rented costume. He'll say he was sent by you to pick them up. Then he'll drive them out of the city and to the woods. He'll tie them up. He'll molest them.

BRANN Yours weren't molested!

EILEEN We're not equal. We're not the same. Remember? He'll torture them. He'll kill them.

BRANN Yours weren't tortured! I don't know what the hell you're doing!

EILEEN Why are you here?

BRANN I came over here to listen to ya.

In the very next line Brann tells Eileen that her bedroom is bugged and he had come over to listen to her from the basement before he found the equipment removed. But in fact now Brann goes overboard to reiterate that she did not kill her children, to tell her to come out of their room. "No, you come in," she insists. The roles are reversed. And it is possible for them to dance, as Eileen sings the hymn Annie used to sing, "Now the Day Is Over." Free to mourn, the two new bodies can dance, which is what people do on graves.

⁷Susannah Radstone distinguishes the "identificatory gaze" as nostalgic for a masculinity defined by phallic authority, from the "auratic gaze," which in Walter Benjamin's terms is the making of experience into memory, the function of the storyteller. See Radstone's "Cinema/memory/history" in *Screen* Vol. 36 No. 1, Spring 1995, p. 44.

LARRY COHEN'S *BONE*:



Return of the Repressed: Bone (Yaphet Kotto) as the embodiment of white anxieties.

COMIC STRIP AS RADICAL STYLE



by Tony Williams

Larry Cohen's first film differs in several degrees from his future work. *Bone* (1972) is difficult to classify generically. It represents an early example of the director's cinematic appropriation of a comic strip style influencing him from a very early age. The characters are all types: affluent Beverly Hills couple, threatening Afro-American intruder, dizzy young woman, and devious business executive. In certain ways, they are caricatures. But, Cohen's choice of methodology is neither superficial nor without historical precedent. As Donald Crafton shows, comic strip and caricature are not entirely trivial artistic devices. They have played instrumental roles in the development of cinema. In his definitive study of film pioneer Emile Cohl and the development of caricature, Crafton points out that caricature played a very important role both in animation and early cinema as a critical ideological weapon taking issue with conformist tendencies in bourgeois society.¹ However, Cohen embodies his players with definable characters and personalities by making them rounded individuals. On one level, they are artificial creations representing social types. But on a much deeper level, they are human beings undergoing contradictions and tensions. They are at war both with themselves and a social environment defining their behaviors and desires. In *Bone*, Larry Cohen unconsciously uses caricature techniques which were once familiar features in the work of forgotten pioneers such as animator Emile Cohl.

Bone is not easy to classify. Audience definitions of reality and fantasy undergo constant subversion. After the opening credit image of a solitary lightbulb, the film begins with what appears to be a car commercial. Then, the audience discovers that the preceding image was a fantasy within the mind of Bill Lennick (Andrew Duggan). Bill discovers a rat in his pool. Suddenly, out of nowhere, the threatening figure of Bone (Yaphet Kotto) appears. Acting out a violent stereotypical role, he demands money from the Lennicks and threatens to rape and kill Bernadette Lennick (Joyce Van Patten) if Bill never returns. At the end of the film, Bone dis-

¹ See Donald Crafton, *Emile Cohl, Caricature and Film* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1990, 10, 46.

appears as mysteriously as he appeared suggesting his creation as a figure of paranoid white fears. However, rapid montage inserts appear intermittently throughout the film showing a young man (Casey King) in a dark cell laughing silently at the proceedings until he decides to end the narrative (and the film) by breaking the lightbulb seen in the opening shot. By this time, the audience guesses that the young man is the Lennicks's abandoned son rotting away in a Spanish jail. The final image on the screen is a television set showing Bill selling cars as in the beginning. This screen suddenly goes black as if the plug has been pulled out.

In a film deliberately blurring boundaries between reality and fantasy, Cohen's comic strip style evokes a long-forgotten pre-Disney animation technique having many parallels to surrealism. Crafton points out that "Although the creators of the first animated films were not surrealists or even cognizant to that movement, they inadvertently made films that demonstrated a disregard for everyday existence, normal logic, and causality, and a propensity for dreamlike action which André Breton and his followers admired".² This description also parallels Cohen's methods motivating his first feature films as director. As well as noting comedy and satire in a cinematic tradition also involving interrelated elements of animation and the comic strip, Crafton also acknowledges a key element in his pioneering study of Emile Cohl. "As a caricaturist, Cohl had chosen to view society from its margins. His adoption of the most marginalized branch of cinema, animation, was not a departure for him; it was his characteristic way of doing things."³ Similarly, Larry Cohen often uses both comic strip style and satirical humor in his films to mediate his particular creative vision. Crafton also notices a feature peculiar to both Cohl and Cohen. "The humor in Cohl's comic strips is primarily visual. It arises from the irrational, unexpected magnification of an everyday incident into an unreal, often oneiric event."⁴ This is equally true of *Bone* as it is of Cohen's other films. Like graphic artist Lyonel Feininger, Cohen's cinema productively links caricature and fantasy as well as political satire.⁵ Although the cinematically polluted appropriated cartoon form appears frequently in recent atrocities such as *The Crow* (1994), *Batman Forever*, and *Judge Dredd* (both 1995), alternative subversive traditions do exist. Cohen's politically committed cinematic comic strip usage has many precedents in the work of artists such as Neal Adams, Dick Briefer, John Buscema, Mike Kaluta, and Ogden Whitney, all of whom operate within similar filmic and satirical traditions.⁶ *Bone* is not so difficult a film to understand as it initially appears.

Bone contains a particular disjunctive style absent from Cohen's later work. It involves a satirical use of

intellectual montage revealing the real motivations within the minds of various characters. Abrupt montage inserts contradict the lies spoken by various characters. They resemble cinematic experiments undertaken by Alfred Hitchcock in his early British films such as *Murder!* In one scene, Hitchcock undermines Doucebelle Markham's weak attempt at feigning social etiquette with Sir John by revealing that her little "tid-bit" is really a bottle of beer and a loaf of bread and cheese. In a later scene, Hitchcock reveals the lavish meal Sir John relinquishes when he reluctantly agrees to Markham's arrangement of spending the night in a policeman's rudimentary accommodation. Sir John appears to accede to the wishes of his working-class hosts. However, Hitchcock shows his mind is really on the meal he will miss. This technique also resembles Fritz Lang's temporary use of montage techniques in his early years in Hollywood as *Fury* (1936) demonstrates. Cohen's appropriation of this device is important. The editing inserts display a highly motivated political unconscious revealing everyday lies conditioning each character's routine existence. Cohen's filmic style in *Bone* is always relevant to plot development.

One scene is particularly insightful. While seduced by the girl (Jeannie Berlin), Bill Lennick's mind is on the automobiles he sells. Rapid shots of automobiles reveal his attitude to sex as equivalent to the mechanical operation of a car on display at a showroom. Bill earlier stated that sex distracts attention away from making money. What is more natural than his mind drawing parallels between an act he regards as mechanical and thinking about a car's seductive performance for the consumer? Seduced and subjected to rape by a girl he may have molested years ago in a New York cinema, Bill mentally transforms the sexual assault into a car commercial! He fits Herbert Marcuse's definition of a consumerist human being in *One-Dimensional Man*. When accosted by the X-Ray Lady (Brett Somers) in the bar about the deceased dog, Fury, he once used in his car commercials, Lennick lies to her about the pet's actual nature. However, rapid inserts of a not-so-friendly animal reveal to the audience lies hidden beneath the explanations he gives her. The Lennick marriage is also based on a lie. So, too, is the economic foundation of their lifestyle.

Bone's first appearance occurs when the camera tracks up from his reflection in the pool near the rat trapped by the suction to a close-up of his seemingly threatening face. Throughout the film tilt-up and tilt-down camera movements often suggest constantly reversing circumstances affecting the protagonists. The camera tracks up from Bill Lennick driving away to get ransom money to show Bone and Bernadette (Joyce Van Patten) watching him from an upstairs window.

Holding Bernadette as hostage, Bone is now in control. Leaving his business manager's office later, Bill's elevator descends to an underground car park passing Bone and Bernadette waiting for him on the ground floor. Earlier, the camera movement suggested Bone as embodying repressed tensions within the Lennicks as it tracked up from Bone's reflection in the water. Bill's descent places him in a dark underground environment. It parallels the depths from which Bone originally emerged. The car park is a violent area where Bone attempts to run down Bill in the Lennicks' car. Bone's attempt also parallels the method Bill used to kill Fury.

Economic motivations corrupt all the leading characters in *Bone*. Fury's death results in more ratings and sales for Bill by sympathetic television audiences. While attempting to obtain the ransom money to save Bernadette, Bill remembers Bernadette's repugnance towards him while they were tied up. Bill hopes that Bone will murder Bernadette so he will make more on television and profit from her death playing the role of bereaved husband. Bernadette and Bone later become allies and plot Bill's murder to profit from his life insurance.

Role reversal and power struggles occur throughout the film. Initially Bone dominates Bernadette. But once she discovers his vulnerability, she dominates him, initiating the sexual act according to Masters and Johnson by lying over him in a masculine "superior" position. Although the act ends with vaseline-lensed images of Bernadette and Bone (a common cinematic method suggesting romance and fantasy) with Bone lying over Bernadette, the visual imagery implicates them as equal partners in a deceptive illusion. Although Bone achieves orgasm in the white man's way, the sequence ends with Bernadette's lines - "Oh Bone! You're everything I imagined you to be!" This not only reinforces Bone's role as a return of the repressed but his changed image. Bone is no longer an archetypal dark force conjured up by white racist tradition, the "big black buck doing what's expected of him" (as Bone says) but a subdued black stud used and abused by his white mistress. Bone's transformation is another of Cohen's strategic role reversal themes. The monster is no monster at all. Despite his threatening veneer, Bone is a vulnerable and sensitive being donning an aggressive mask to protect himself from a threatening society. By doing so, he thus conforms to the image expected of him. Similarly, the *It's Alive* babies initially act to protect themselves from a hostile society. But the aggression soon becomes second nature to them due to social conditioning. They act in the way they are expected to.

Split-second fragmented images of Kenneth Lennick (Casey King) appear at the beginning of the film. They endure longer on the screen during other intermittent

appearances and break up *Bone's* narrative diegesis. Kenneth's presence acts as a framing device, initiating the action and concluding the film. The lightbulb imagery is highly suggestive. *Bone* begins with a bulb slowly emerging from darkness until the camera zooms into it, making the screen white, leading to Bill's car salesman address to the camera. The lightbulb is a diminutive object surrounded by the darkness. But the camera eye zooms into it until the whole screen becomes white. This movement represents an ideal metaphor describing the Lennicks and their affluent Beverly Hills culture. Despite their affluent white lifestyle, they are really vulnerable before a surrounding darkness which will eventually engulf them. *Bone* concludes with Kenneth's destruction of the lightbulb. It not only plunges the cinema screen into darkness but switches off a small television monitor showing Bill once more performing as a salesman. This is a fitting demise for Bill since he lived his entire life like a character from a television advertisement. Before Bernadette murders him Bill pleads for his life to her using language reminiscent of the car sales pitch featured in previous scenes. *Bone's* whole structure now appears as the result of vengeful psychodrama by a son whose existence his parents deny. Kenneth languishes in a Spanish prison cell convicted of drug-smuggling charges. Bill and Bernadette deny what has happened to Kenneth and abandon him. They construct their own fantasy scenario about Kenneth serving as a helicopter pilot in Viet Nam, a scenario they eventually believe to be real. They ignore Kenneth's actual existence in much the same way they deny the reality of their marriage and financial circumstances. The Lennicks also condescendingly ignore people from other

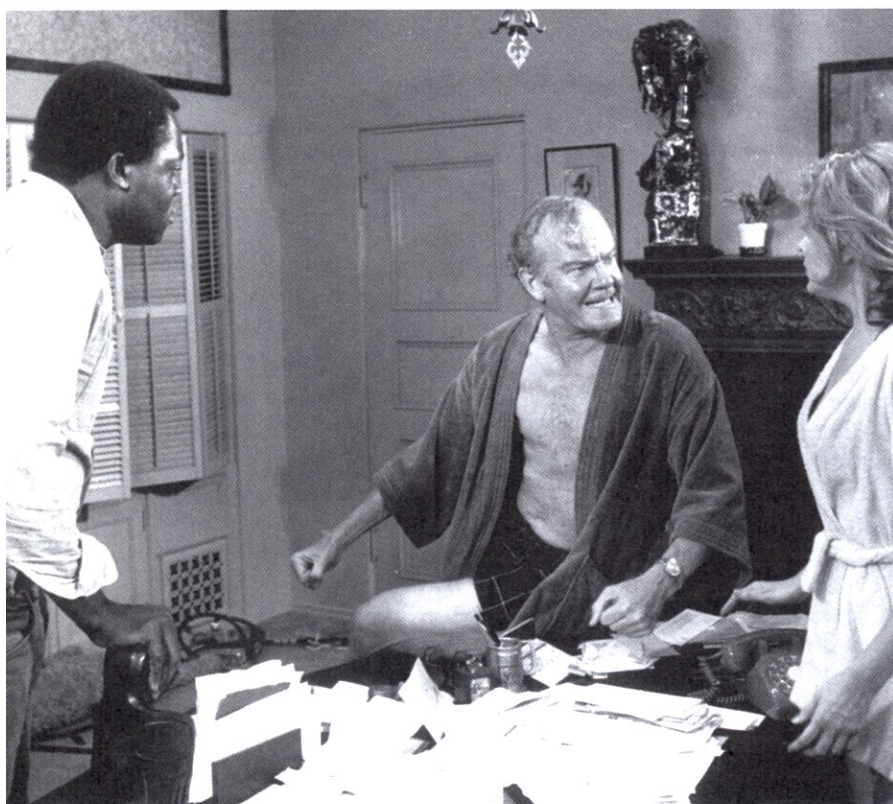
² Donald Crafton, *Before Mickey: The Animated Film 1898-1928* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1982), 348.

³ Crafton, *Emile Cohl*, 307.

⁴ Crafton, 80.

⁵ See Ernst Scheyer, *Lyonel Feininger: Caricature and Fantasy* (Detroit, Michigan: Wayne State University Press, 1964), 63, 69. Caricature and political commentary also have historical precedent. See here Syd Hoff, *Editorial and Political Cartooning* (New York: Stravon Educational Press, 1976), 16-31. For a concise definition of a political cartoon having both a serious and lasting significance see Charles Press, *The Political Cartoon* (Rutherford, New Jersey: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1981), 23-26. 6. For Neal Adams, Dick Briefer, and John Buscema see Ron Goulart, *The Great Comic Book Artists* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1986), 2-3, 14-15, 16-17. According to Buscema, Stan Lee of Marvel Comics recommended that he think in terms of camera angles when drawing his comic strip. It is more than coincidental that Cohen's last-feature-to-date, *The Ambulance* (1990) stars Eric Roberts as a comic-strip artist working for Marvel Comics in a film featuring Stan Lee in a cameo role. For Mike Kaluta and Ogden Whitney see Ron Goulart, *The Great Comic Book Artists, Volume 2* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1989), 64-65, 110-111.

Bone and Bernadette (Joyce van Patten).



The bourgeois family disrupted (centre: Bill/Andrew Duggan)

racial and class backgrounds. In the opening scene, Bill complains about Japanese gardeners and garbage men who "take no pride in their job." He refuses to let his departing Hispanic maid receive a phone call from her brother. Bone soon appears as the archetypal image of a working-class black whose presence the Lennicks chose to deny.

In his first film, Cohen already illustrates the disastrous consequence of denials involving family, class, history, and race. Like other families in seventies family horror movies such as *The Night Walk* (1972) and *The Hills Have Eyes* (1977), Bill and Bernadette Lennick choose to ignore unpleasant realities in their own society. They live a selfish affluent life style totally oblivious of a pernicious class structure oppressing racial minorities. Their denial also operates on a personal and family level as seen with their refusal to acknowledge Kenneth's plight.

Bone also anticipates Cohen's future tendencies of closely associating fantasy and reality. All the characters live in some form of deceitful illusion. Bone may be a creation of Bernadette's desire to murder her husband, a desire she disavows in the film's conclusion, similar to the rejection of Kenneth. When Bill discovers a rat in his pool, uttering the famous words in *Frankenstein* (1931) (also the title of Cohen's fourth film) - "It's Alive," Bernadette denies its presence. "I don't see a rat in the pool." Bill immediately responds, "You don't want to see." After Bill notes that the rat is trapped in the pool - "He can't get out. The suction keeps him down" - Bone immediately appears. Viewing Bone's working-class appearance and initially taken aback by a dominant black physique clad in paint-splattered denim shirt and jeans, Bernadette looks at Bone and begins to demean her husband. "I don't see anything. Maybe he imagined things." This line leads to an extreme close-up of Bone's face as he looks at Bill asking him, "You imagine things?" The following

shot frames Bone in the left foreground of the screen with Bernadette opposite him on the other side in the background with the pool separating them. Their cinematic framing suggests undefined associations linking them both. Bone kills the rat but brushes it briefly against Bill's robe before throwing it away. The act suggests some link between both men. Bone is also Bill's fantasy creation. But Bone also lives the same sort of lie as the Lennicks. He acts out the role of a black man white society prefers not to see. Bone never realizes that his behavior does not represent his real identity but rather results from desired objectification on the part of a racist culture preferring to view him as a dangerous "Other." At first, Bone plays the role of a violent black threatening to rob the home and rape the white woman. However, he achieves neither goal. After Bone fails to rape Bernadette, he appears as a vulnerable pathetic being susceptible to further manipulation by white culture. He becomes Bernadette's stud and accomplice. While driving to confront Bill, Bone talks about the racially biased dualities present in American culture from the earliest times stating that he never knew whether his real identity was as "Wild Bill" or "Fuzzy." Later events educate him. After Bernadette's brutal murder of Bill, he finds out his white mistress really despises him. When Bone and Bernadette surround Bill as he vainly pleads for his life on the sand dune, she tells Bone, "Come on Fuzzy. Cut him off at the top." When Bone protests that murdering Bill was really his job, she retorts, "Hey You! Leave us alone. This is a family affair." Having undergone the dominant culture's transformation from a violent Magua to a harmless Chingachgook or Tonto, Bone disappears after hearing Bernadette scornfully say, "Fuzzy. I never needed you." *Bone* reveals that all the characters, whether white or black, are victims of a depraved culture, one implicitly needing radical change. It contaminates everyone within its domain as the entire film reveals. Whatever one's racial group, no one is ever entirely free from the surrounding corruption, a fact *Black Caesar* also emphasizes.⁷

After the opening lightbulb shot in *Bone*, the following sequence features Bill Lennick. At first, it appears realistic. Bill sells cars in a television commercial reminiscent of those All-State Insurance commercials appearing in breaks during sixties television shows such as *The Defenders* and *The Nurses*. However, as the camera cranes out we see dead bodies in the cars and understand that Bill broadcasts in a used-car lot full of road-accident victims. Bill denies what is really present. He becomes increasingly agitated. "Nobody gets turned away...Somebody take the car off my hands." The sequence ends in a close-up of Bill's face as he speaks the lines, "It's a goddam shithouse." A zoom-out cam-

era movement showing Bill in the different environment of his Beverly Hills swimming pool suggests the previous images represent his own nightmare realization of complicity in a death-dealing culture of car accidents. Bill then complains about the state of his property and a working-class proletariat no longer answering to his bidding. Television commercials featuring Bill appear intermittently throughout *Bone* suggesting him as a latterday Willy Loman. He lives an American Dream based upon denial and lies as his counterpart in Arthur Miller's *Death of A Salesman*. The imagery also reveals that the supposedly affluent Lennick life-style relies upon deception and violence for its very existence since Bill sells cars having a high body count on American highways. The actual number of deaths and injuries parallels the body count then going on in Viet Nam, a heroic imaginary battlefield into which the Lennicks banish their son. As a salesman, Bill also incarnates the trickster figure of Herman Melville's *The Confidence Man*, a character whose presence articulates those ideologically denied factors of violence and murder within American culture. Bill's shaky demeanor at the end of his car sales pitch shows a social mask dropping. Bone then appears in answer to the different frustrations within a husband and wife who want to murder each other. All three characters exist in a symbiotic relationship, emphasized by the same alphabetical letter ("B") used for their names.

Bone also uses motifs from the Hitchcock tradition. But Cohen interweaves them into his own narrative so the appropriations are barely discernible. Bone evokes repressed desires on the part of an American dysfunctional family. He resembles the Uncle Charlie figure conjured by Young Charlie in *Shadow of A Doubt* as well as the demonic *alter ego* figure of Puritan mythology depicted by Nathaniel Hawthorne in "Young Goodman Brown." Hitchcock also indirectly influences Cohen's choice of *mise-en-scène*. Bill Lennick wears a green robe at the pool. Bernadette wears a green bikini. She later dons a yellow robe. In his visit to the bank, Bill wears a light yellow jacket. In *Vertigo* and *The Birds*, green and yellow are symbolic primary colors having deep associations with violence and sexuality.

Bone operates on several levels. It resembles an off-Broadway theatrical satire transferred to film, borrowing aspects of screwball comedy, the American-Jewish tradition parodying complacent bourgeois life-styles, and fantasy. It also appropriates modernist and post-

⁷ For some insightful comments concerning Cohen's treatment of race and class in American culture long before this became academically fashionable see Elayne B. Graham Chaplin's doctoral dissertation, *Monstrous Masculinity? Boys, Men, and Monsters in the Films of Larry Cohen* (England: Sunderland University, 1992).



Larry Cohen directing *Bone*.

modernist styles (especially using irony, satire, and parody). *Bone* may also be described as a cinematic Chinese puzzle box leading the viewer along with the promise of a narratological resolution but finally leaving the enigma open. *Bone* contains all of these features but can not reductively be reduced to any of them. At the same time, it is no ludic play of hyper-realistic signifiers with visual and thematic referents dependent on an undefinable reality. Cohen's intention is highly serious.

Like George and Martha in Edward Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf*, Bill and Bernadette Lennick live a life of psychic prostitution denying any unpleasant realities. When Bone forces Bill and Bernadette into their house, a voice-over accompanies the scene. Although this appears clumsy, since it is superimposed over the action and bears no relationship to lip movements, it is also formally understandable as representing the Lennicks' deceptive denial of the threatening situation they find themselves in. It is deliberately unreal, paralleling the false denials they practise in daily life. Despite their affluent image, the Lennicks are actually near to bankruptcy. Bill guides Bone around the house like a real estate agent showing a respective buyer a highly sought-after property thus denying another dangerous reality threatening the unreal nature of his existence.

Ransacking Bill's office, throwing books off the shelf (including William Styron's *The Confessions of Nat Turner*), Bone not only discovers the real financial situation of the Lennicks but Bill's deceitful borrowing of \$5,000 on Bernadette's life insurance. As he dominates the Lennicks by his powerful black presence, a modernist painting of a nude black female appears on the wall next to him. It illustrates the reverse nature of the racially-biased objectifying process dominating Bone. The painting represents the acceptable form of black female racial depiction

- sexually objectified by the white male gaze. Bone represents another, equally pernicious, product of white representation - a dangerous, threatening black male conjured up by white phobia. The nude female painting is the counterpart of the image of Theda Bara as vamp later seen in the girl's (Jeannie Berlin) apartment. It embodies Bill's depiction of her dangerous sexually threatening nature. However, we later learn the girl is no threat. She is as mixed up about her real identity as Bone is.

The girl initially appears to be a free-wheeling spontaneous spirit ripping off consumerist society and free from the problems affecting the Lennicks. But she is actually a neurotic victim of the same type of family situation oppressing the Lennicks. She ascribes her condition as due to sexual molestation by an older man one evening in a New York theatre many years ago. Her mother denied the reality of the event in much the same way the Lennicks deny what has actually happened to their son. As the girl says, "She never really wanted to look at me after that. She really didn't want to hear it."

The girl believes Bill was the molester. Although Bill lies about ever being in a movie theatre in his life - "I don't go to the movies. It is a waste of valuable business time" - he does reveal he has attended movie shows. When the girl speaks about her assailant's cold hands being the result of washing under a cold tap, Bill comments, "There's never any hot water in theaters." Bill may be the actual assailant. But even if he is not, he is still a powerful white male with the same type of perversity logically leading to child assault as a form of patriarchal domination. Bill speaks of sex being a waste of time: "All that energy could be better spent by expanding profits and getting ahead." He began his capitalist career selling used comic books which he used to keep under his pillow at night. Associations of repressed sexuality and capitalistic acquisitiveness are present in his personality. Even if Bill is innocent both he and the girl are equal victims of an oppressive system resulting in sexual and economic perversion. When Bill tells the girl about his early days selling comic books, she calls him a "pervert." Although she takes revenge by sexually assaulting him, her victory really represents no strategic reversal of her condition. It is as meaningless as Bone's "successful" laying of Bernadette which occurs at the same time. Bernadette penetrates Bone's black macho posture and discovers a vulnerable being whom she will use for revenge on Bill.

Bone constantly demonstrates the inherent futility of any positive reversible power situations under the present system. No matter who gains the upper hand nothing actually changes. Power will remain and corrupt everyone. Bone first dominates Bill and

Bernadette sending the husband out to get money. Bill becomes dominated by the girl, becoming her accomplice in a supermarket robbery and a victim of female rape. Bernadette dominates Bone sexually, making him her passive accomplice. The girl is a neurotic victim of a traumatic child assault conditioning her adult behavior. Perverted by the urban squalor affecting impoverished Afro-Americans Bone acts in the way most white people expect - as a dangerous "Menace 2 Society." Bernadette's contempt for Bill leads to a murder. The whole film operates by showing changing power relationships throughout its running time. But no matter what gender or race holds the final card any real improvement in the situation is negligible. The same system remains in control.

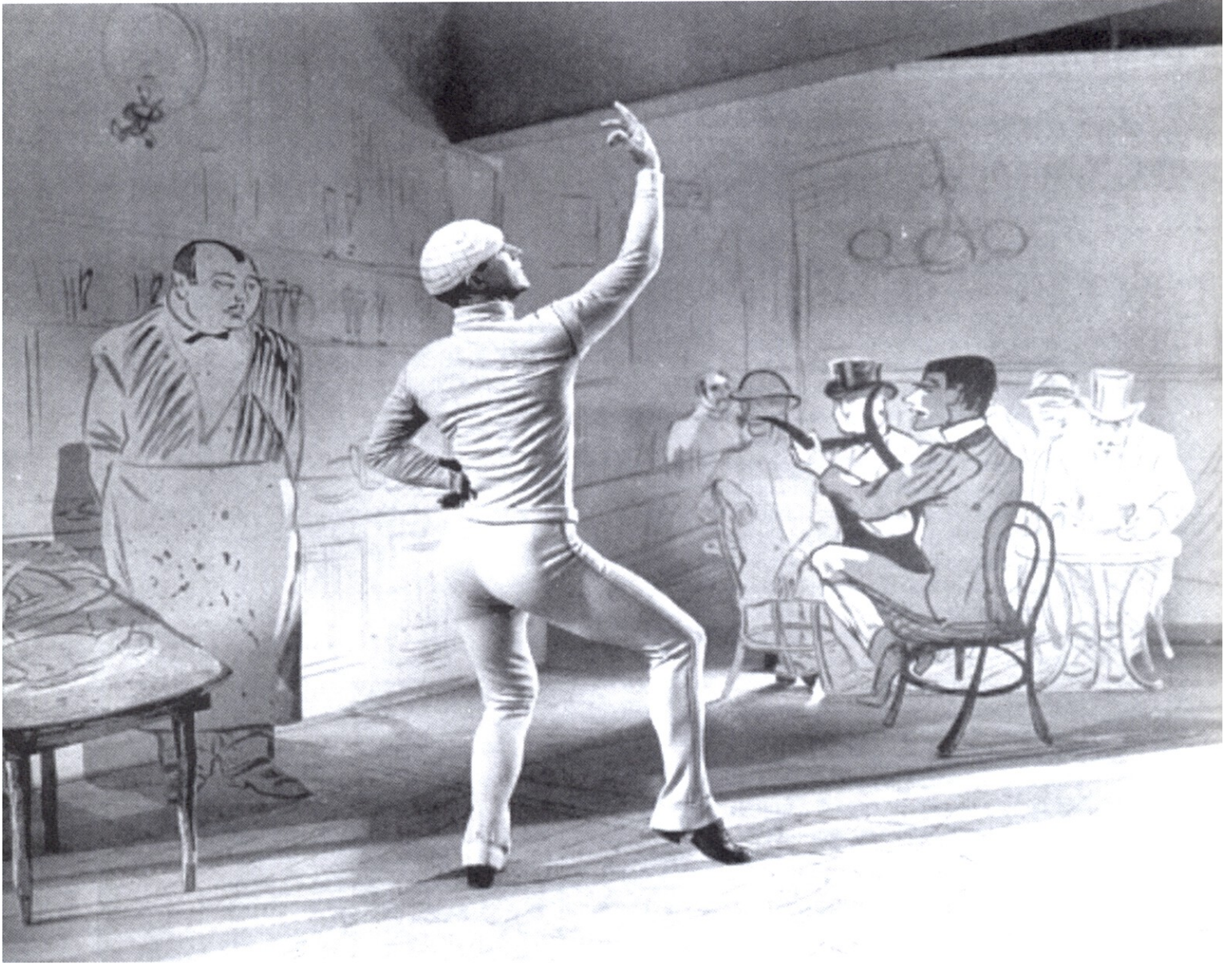
Bone illustrates that an American society based upon lies and deception can only logically lead to violence and death. The personal Lennick family dilemma parallels that of the contemporary body politic. Bernadette finally reveals the truth to Bone. Their son Kenneth is imprisoned in Spain for smuggling drugs. However, she denies responsibility for his plight, uttering lines duplicating the ones she repeats to the camera at the end of the film when she rehearses her alibi for Bill's murder: "I don't know whose idea it was. It couldn't have been mine. I'd remember. It might have been Bill. I'd remember..I'd remember, wouldn't I?" As Bill retreats before Bernadette and Bone and makes his last appeal to them. ("We're not acting normally"), he states explicitly that Bernadette never replied to any of Kenneth's letters while he was in jail. Bernadette murders Bill. Bone mysteriously disappears in the same way he entered the film. Bernadette rehearses her alibi for the murder before the camera. She blames Bone in stereotypically racist terms using him as a convenient scapegoat for the murder in terms similar to a recent court case. Bernadette repeats the lines she initially spoke to Bone about the Lennicks' denial of Kenneth's existence. "I don't know whose idea it was. It couldn't have been mine..I'd remember it. Wouldn't I? Wouldn't I?" long after the image fades to black.

Bone is a black comedy revealing a nihilistic underside beneath an affluent American life style. The film is far more radical than *Down and Out in Beverly Hills* (1985) in the nature of its criticism. *Bone* reveals a society in which no character wishes to confront reality and change for the better. However, Cohen challenges alert audiences to move towards changing dangerous ideological systems by means of a subversive comic strip style which still remains underused and unappreciated today.

BOOK REVIEW

Cinema and Painting: How Art is Used in Film
(Angela Dalle Vacche. Austin: University of
Texas Press, 1996. 303 pages)

CINEMA AND PAINTING: HOW ART IS USED IN FILM



An American in Paris. Film imitates Art. Gene Kelly as the dancer Chocolat in Toulouse-Lautrec's *Chocolat Dancing at the Achilles Bar* (1896).

by Susan Morrison

This book is an attempt by an art historian to expand the horizons of her discipline in a self-proclaimed effort to “join...in the new field of comparative arts” (p. 1). Her project is ostensibly premised on the notion that art history cannot ignore film studies because “the cinema has forever changed the meaning of the word ‘art’ and the meaning of the word ‘history’” (p. 2). But just as film studies specialists have in recent years moved towards a broader definition of their mandate so as to include video, television and even computer-generated art within their (academic) purview, so it would seem that art historians need to abandon their exclusionary perspective on the fine arts if they are to survive (or at least compete) in this ‘post-postmodern’ world.

Angela Dalle Vacche, an Associate Professor of Art History at Yale University, takes as her focus the query restated from the subtitle: How (is) art used in film? Given that this could be a very large topic, she formulates a narrower set of questions intended to focus the resultant discussion more specifically on the art of painting, which is, for her, “the most problematic but also the most alluring (sic) of art forms”. In doing this, she thereby revises the original question to ‘How is *painting* used in film?’ Dalle Vacche first asks: “(W)hat happens to the paintings used or alluded to in these texts?”, and then, “(H)ow do these films define painting as the realm of high art, creativity and femininity(sic), setting it against popular culture or industrial technology?” (p. 2) While the first question seeks merely to place ‘painting’ concretely within the filmic text, as an object to be identified, duly noted, and cross-referenced (as in ‘old art history’), the second question takes us into the more value-laden realm of oppositional critiques which pay homage to contemporary critical theory (as in ‘new film theory’).

Her method of inquiry has led her to choose examples from different cultural contexts and historical circumstances, ‘each directed by strong, creative personalities (sic)’. The result is that the films she selects offer up different answers to the questions, and each, therefore, constitutes a separate chapter with a separate focus alluded to in its title, an approach she terms “thematic”. Thus, in addition to the introductory chapter, there are eight others each dealing with a specific director, specific film, and specific theme. They are, in order: Vincente Minnelli’s *An American in Paris*: Painting as Psychic Upheaval; Michelangelo Antonioni’s *Red Desert*: Painting as Ventriloquism and Color as Movement; Eric Rohmer’s *The Marquise of O*:

Painting Thoughts, Listening to Images; Jean-Luc Godard’s *Pierrot le Fou*: Cinema as Collage against Painting; Andrei Tarkovsky’s *Andrei Rublev*: Cinema as the Restoration of Icon Painting; F.W. Murnau’s *Nosferatu*: Romantic Painting as Horror and Desire in Expressionist Cinema; Kenji Mizoguchi’s *Five Women Around Utamaro*: Film between Woodblock Printing and Tattooing; and Alain Cavalier’s *Thérèse*: Still Life and the Close-Up as Feminine Space.

A major difficulty for *this* reader arises as a direct result of the overwhelmingly episodic nature of the text. While the chapters are similar in their individual concerns with a single film, the fact is that the method of investigation as well as the findings differ so radically that there is no connection between them, no overall argument that can be traced through them, and hence no coherence to the project as a whole. Ironically, the ‘intertextuality’ that Dalle Vacche establishes as a key element in her textual analyses of individual films is precisely what is missing in her own text.

One of the fundamental problems with *Cinema and Painting*, I believe, is that neither of the key terms, ‘art’ and ‘painting’, is ever clearly defined; the author’s assumption being, I suppose, that their meaning is self-evident. However, all sorts of difficulties evolve from this omission. ‘Art’ and ‘painting’ are not synonymous, nor are they equivalents. That is, to ask a question about painting is not the same as to ask a question about art. While film *is* an art form (Dalle Vacche’s fears notwithstanding), it is *not* a form of painting. A film and a painting may both be described as ‘art works’, but their conception, production and reception are not really comparable. To overlook these differences results in a most confusing argument. Without a solid basis of terminological understanding, words take on any meaning (and no meaning) whatsoever. This is, unfortunately, pretty well descriptive of the tenor of this text.

For example, in the chapter on Antonioni’s *Red Desert*, Dalle Vacche consistently refers to the director as painter, as painting the film (when, in fact, he merely paints the sets). Further, the opening sentence relates how *Red Desert* has been repeatedly compared to abstract painting, but this is neither explained (what, exactly, does it *mean* for a film to be compared to an abstract painting?) nor referenced. Two quotations from the director follow (again, unreferenced): the first, which is given the date of 1942, states that black and white is to color as drawing is to painting; the second, from 1964, implies that colour (film?), which has acquired a new meaning in everyday life, will replace black and white film. Dalle Vacche proceeds to make a tautological leap by interpreting these quotations to mean that they are/he is ‘associating color

with painting and the future” and that they are “about color as abstract painting and color as the language of the future”. Her use of the allusion to abstract painting gets even more opaque and equally specious when, near the end of this substantial chapter, she begins to search for specific references to abstract works within the *mise-en-scène*.

In a sense, Dubuffet’s work (“Hautes Pates”), with its oscillation between low materials with the look of excrement, mud, or decomposing bones and childlike outlines of highly simplified characters, parallels the struggle for self-assertion experienced by Giuliana in *Red Desert* (p.72).

and

The patches of red, blue, yellow and green applied to the side of an old hut Ugo lets go to ruin are reminiscent not only of the tassels in Ravenna’s Byzantine mosaics but also of the thick dabs of contrasting colors that Stael(sic), another proponent of Art Informel, specialized in (p.73).

and

At the beginning of the film, while Giuliana is furtively eating a sandwich, her eyes dwell on black shapes on the ground whose broken outlines and corporeal densities echo the black blotches Soulages is most famous for (p.73).

Needless to say, neither film nor paintings benefit from this reductive approach.

Surely, a crucial question, neither asked nor dealt with in *Cinema and Painting*, is What is an *art* film? Given that seven of the eight films Dalle Vacche has selected are absolutely canonical non-Hollywood, non-mainstream ‘foreign’ art films, and six of those seven were directed by internationally-recognized and acclaimed ‘serious’ directors, her unwillingness or neglect in tackling that question is mystifying. However, what this oversight does appear to do is permit her to include Vincente Minnelli’s 1952 full-blown MGM technicolor musical *An American in Paris* as an equivalent text - a decision that has to be mind-boggling to anyone with even the most rudimentary knowledge about film history and theory. Not only is it included, but by its placement as the first film to be discussed, it appears to be privileged over the others. Dalle Vacche’s introductory justification for this is as follows:

I start with Minnelli’s *An American in Paris* and follow it with Antonioni’s *Red Desert* because, by setting them next to each other, I want to suggest how much common territory can be found between a European “art film” and an MGM Hollywood musical. This order makes it possible to see the European art film as a special genre that only deviates from or simply alters, but does not subvert, the Hollywood mode. Antonioni’s reach-

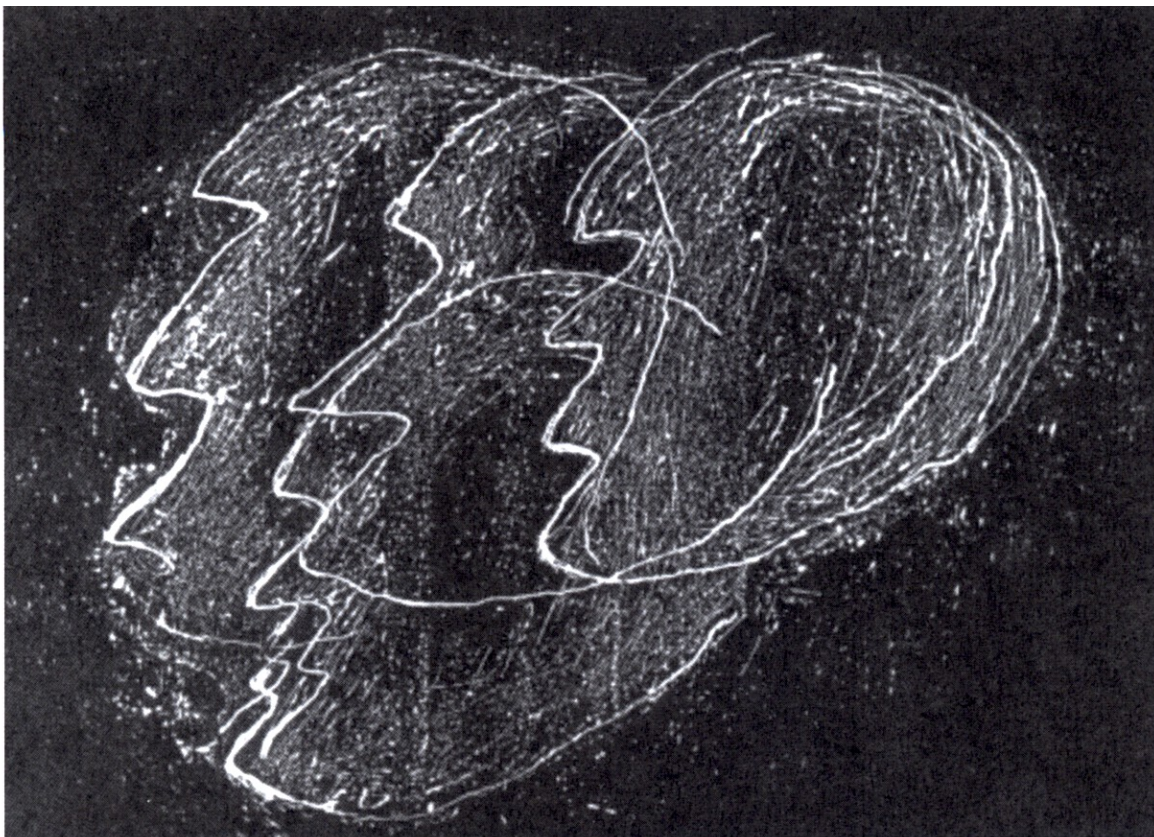
ing out to painting in film is as unsettling as Minnelli’s. Whether creativity is set in the rigid context of the American industry or in the looser European milieu, it always and inevitably destabilizes male identity. *An American in Paris* and *Red Desert* both qualify as art films..... (pp.5-6)

However provocative some of these statements may be, nowhere in the course of the text are they worked out as a cogent argument. They are merely dropped into the text, as if for effect, and then abandoned. Minnelli, it would seem, has been included because the *Cahiers du Cinema* crowd considered him an *auteur*; although she does not make clear that he was not ranked among the great directors, but singled out for his idiosyncratic highly stylized formal approach. For Dalle Vacche, however, there is little distance between *auteur* and *artiste*.

Granted, *An American in Paris* is *about* art, at least nominally. Set at the beginning of the fifties, its protagonist is Jerry/Gene Kelly, an American ex GI who has stayed on in Paris in order to paint. First and foremost, however, the plot is about a guy, Jerry, who falls in love with Lisa, a very young French woman who turns out to be engaged to Henri, an older Frenchman. Art is really incidental to the narrative, although absolutely crucial to the style of the film. Historically, the art scene in post-war Paris, as in post-war New York, had been transformed dramatically, not just because of the war and its after-effects, but also because of the impact of abstraction as the radical new means of expression. This film presents an art/world untouched by either; Jerry’s own paintings are loosely realistic views of the city; the artists specifically referred to by the film are primarily nineteenth century Impressionists (Renoir), Post-Impressionists (Dégas, Toulouse-Lautrec, Utrillo) and early twentieth century modernists (Dufy) and *primitifs* (Rousseau).

Dalle Vacche, however, ignores the intriguing problematic evoked by this anachronism¹ in order to play her trump card; Jackson Pollock. While she admits that there is no evidence of any direct influence of Pollock on Minnelli, that does not prevent her from noticing all sorts of connections, from a shared interest in Surrealism’s linking creativity to the unconscious to their “cherish(ing) well-known American values of youth, energy and spontaneity, and they both fantasized about a fusion of self and other, of subject and object, that is, becoming one with the image. To convey this desire,

¹ One can only surmise that this was a result of the increasing popularity in post-war America of late nineteenth and early twentieth century French painting. In other words, Hollywood was substituting its knowledge of what was commercially successful in the art market for what was avant-garde in the artists’ studios.



Hostages Black Background (1944-1947; printed c. 1962), by Jean Fautrier.

they transformed painting into dancing, while subscribing to a primitivist approach that enables the artist to reach back to the roots of his creative impulse" (p. 15).

One thread I would like to pull from the above is her claim about Minnelli and Pollock both transforming painting into dancing. For this to make any sense with regards to Minnelli, it would have to mean that he took actual paintings (e.g. Renoir's 1872 *Pont Neuf* or Toulouse-Lautrec's 1896 *Chocolat Dancing at the Achilles Bar*) and used them as visual sources for dance numbers. For this to make sense with Pollock, though, she has to pull a sleight of hand, and turn his photographically-documented method of production (i.e. moving around a canvas placed on the floor while applying liquid paints by dripping and flinging techniques) into a *simile* for dance; a trick which not only trivializes his approach but also seriously misunderstands his intentions. And even then, there is no parallel to be found in these two instances. The ultimate question has to be, then, to what end does she tailor these examples to fit a pre-conceived notion of what she wants to find?

Perhaps the clearest example of this slipperiness may be found in another analogy she makes between Minnelli and Pollock.

We have no record that either artist made statements about the other, but we can still account for the weakness of Minnelli's happy ending for *An American in Paris* by recalling the popular perception of Pollock's visceral approach to art-making. This is to say, in the fifties Pollock's laconic,

intense persona must have pushed the boundaries of heterosexuality to the point where it threatened to slip into homoeroticism" (p.5).

What is she actually saying here? The boy-girl(Jerry/Lisa) relationship in Minnelli's film could only be a front for the real boy-boy(Jerry/Henri or is it Jerry/Adam) couple? Jackson Pollock was a gay pin-up boy?

In addition to the general weakness of the ideas expressed in *Cinema and Painting*, there are other aspects of the text which I found frustrating as well. Even though some of the films she uses are quite well-known, I would imagine that the less-specialized reader would not have familiarity with the lesser-known examples, like *Thérèse*, *Five Women Around Utamaro*, *The Marquise of O*. At least some form of narrative outline would have been useful in order to follow her analyses. With *Thérèse*, which I have not seen, I found I had no idea of what the film was about, after reading the chapter on it. Her illustrations are for the most part well-chosen, but there is the odd one which has little connection to the text and yet has an entire page devoted to it—the reproduction of Delaunay's *Eiffel Tower with Trees* (1910) on p. 37 or de Stael's *Painting* (1947)p. 74, useful perhaps if reproduced in colour, but not much help flattened out in black and white.

While the project of investigating the relationship between art and the cinema is a valid enterprise, I'm afraid that *Cinema and Painting: How Art is used in Film* does not adequately address the scope and implications of the task.





Contributors

Peter Babiak is a graduate student in English at York University. He also considers himself to be a recanted bourgeois, an untried filmmaker, and a justifiably neglected poet.

Florence Jacobowitz teaches film studies at Atkinson College, York University.

Richard Lippe teaches film studies at Atkinson College, York University.

Susan Morrison is an art teacher in Toronto.

Diane Sippl is a LA based critic who writes on contemporary world cinema with a focus on American independent filmmaking.

Michael Walker writes for *Movie* and is co-author (with Robin Wood) of a book on Chabrol.

Tony Williams teaches cinema studies in the department of English at Southern Illinois University. He is the author of *Jack London: The Movies*, the forthcoming *Hearths of Darkness* and co-author of *Vietnam War Films*.

Robin Wood has two new hips and a computer; they have changed his life.

An American in Paris
Academy Award, Cinematography (1951): John Alton.



Claudette Colbert: In Memoriam (1903-1996).